This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

+ *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
+ *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
+ *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
+ *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at `http://books.google.com/`

600064327S

600064327S

0064

THE RAPIERS OF REGENT'S PARK.

VOL. II.

THE RAPIERS OF REGENT'S PARK.

VOL. II.

THE RAPIERS OF REGENT'S PARK

BY

JOHN CORDY JEAFFRESON

AUTHOR OF

"LIVE IT DOWN," "LOTTIE DARLING,"
"A WOMAN IN SPITE OF HERSELF,"
&c., &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

BIBLIOTHECA
AUG 1882
BODLEIANA

LONDON:
HURST AND BLACKETT, PUBLISHERS,
13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.
1882.

All rights reserved.

251. i. 924.

BOOK II.

(CONTINUED.)

JEALOUSY.

THE RAPIERS OF REGENT'S PARK.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE THIRD ALTERNATIVE.

LEAVING Cyril Twyford in a meditative mood, Miss Rapier was no less thoughtful on her return to Thurlow Lodge. The success of her visit to Fitzroy Square was scarcely a success on which she could congratulate herself. Fruitful of intelligence beyond her expectation, the expedition had quickened her sense of danger by extinguishing her hope that Phyllis Lovelock was married. Unwed Phyllis Lovelock was also unengaged. Even if she had in former time refused offers from a girlish preference of her cousin Cyril to all other young men, she was under no promise to him. It was incredible that she nursed the hope of becoming his wife. Even Cyril Twyford's vanity and lingering tenderness for the girl whom he

once thought of wooing had not emboldened him to say he might still have her for the asking. Erica was not even certain that he had hinted so much in the single, ambiguous utterance which she had at the moment construed in a way so little creditable to his modesty and manliness. Anyhow, Phyllis was still free to accept a proposal from Arthur Champion. Moreover, she was in London. In drawing-rooms he was not likely to encounter the realization of his ideal, whilst she tarried with her invalid aunt in the seclusion of a Bayswater lodging-house. But he might see her in a picture-gallery, or run across her in a public thoroughfare. In either case he would recognize her immediately, discover her temporary abode, devise some means of making her acquaintance, and lose no time in declaring the passion he had cherished for her long ere she gave up dolls and short dresses.

That such a declaration would be successful Miss Rapier could not doubt, for in her opinion Arthur Champion was irresistible, an opinion by no means peculiar to herself. Unattended as they were by the usual signs of middle-age, his years would be in his favour. A man of forty-five has the advantage of a stripling in tact, tone, chivalric sensibility, and conversational adroitness. From larger experience of

womanly nature, he is more skilful in the arts that conciliate womankind. Moreover, Arthur would approach Phyllis with evidence that he had loved her in fancy long before he had seen her in fact, or on a painted canvas. What woman would be indifferent to testimony so flattering to her self-love, so eloquent of romantic devotion? What unengaged girl could decline the prayer of such a suitor as Arthur Champion, who could rest his appeal to her affections on so extraordinary a fact? If Phyllis Lovelock and Arthur came together whilst she was free to accept him, Erica could not doubt she would lose the daily companionship of her brother-in-law and the custody of his children.

Having undertaken to make inquiries of Cyril Twyford, and in a month communicate their results to her brother-in-law, she could no longer let matters take their own course and commit her happiness to chance. She must perform her trust honestly and tell Arthur that Phyllis was attainable, or, abusing his confidence, she must induce him to think Cyril's cousin a married woman. At first it seemed that her choice was limited to these two alternatives; and it would be difficult to say which of the two was the more distasteful to her. On learning that Phyllis was still Miss Lovelock

of Evensong Villa, Ryde, Arthur would fly to the Isle of Wight and throw himself at her feet. This thought was unendurable. If untruth made him imagine her a married woman, he might at any moment discover the falsehood; in which case he would never forgive his deceiver. At once there would be an end of his brotherly affection *for* and confidence *in* his deceased wife's sister; and he would henceforth regard her with disdainful aversion. This thought also was unendurable. So long as she saw no third alternative, Erica Rapier was desperate. But ere the day ended she saw a third course.

In her deliberations she took account of Cyril Twyford's character and circumstances. He was vain, selfish, without principle, and in a certain weak and morbid way sentimental. Having squandered his patrimony and burdened himself with shameful domestic encumbrances, he was poor. The selfish man was of course weary at heart of the woman whose bonnet had that morning adorned the high-backed chair. The unprincipled man would doubtless be glad to rid himself of this "intimate friend," and also of her child, whom he had not the courage to acknowledge as his son. The vain man probably flattered himself that he was still the chief object of his cousin's admiration. The

man of weak morbid sentimentality no doubt imagined he loved her, though an unkind destiny had put a distance between them. It was conceivable that he thought he had a title to her love, and would deem himself a victim of feminine perfidy, if she married anyone else,—a victim of woman's heartlessness, if she declined to commit her stainless breast and pure life to his unworthy hands. Lastly, the poor man would consent to anything for money.

At the same time Miss Rapier took account of Phyllis Lovelock's character and relations to her cousin. Five years since she had certainly regarded him with pride and cousinly tenderness. From her earliest childhood till he became an idler upon town, she had lived in close intimacy with him. If she had not been definitely contracted to him, circumstances had caused her in her girlhood to think of him as one to whom she might in time be affianced. His first successes caused her joy. His early errors had touched her compassion, and perhaps even quickened her liking for him, through the action of those generous feelings that so often cause a good girl to take a peculiar interest in the scapegrace of her domestic circle. Of his sins—the sins that would make her shrink from him as something monstrous—she probably knew nothing. Many conceivable influences

might have kept her in ignorance of his vices. *She* could not have sat to him for her portrait if she knew all the evil of his heart and life. Even if she were acquainted with much of his wickedness, so gentle a creature would be lenient to his failings, prayerful for his amendment, and eager to reclaim him from his bad ways. The woman who was so thoughtful for others might even be induced to sacrifice herself for the man whom, from the force of early associations, she regarded with affection and pity, though not with the warmest love.

Miss Rapier cast up these two accounts as she sauntered meditatively about her garden within a few hours of her first visit to Fitzroy Square; and having reconsidered each item of the two schedules, and contemplated the possible result of a fortunate co-operation of the several forces recorded in them, she nodded her little dark head, and said to herself decisively,

"They must marry; I must make them marry. *Their* union would end *my* danger." Her next thoughts were, "And no time must be lost. He must extort a promise of marriage from her—a conditional promise if he cannot win an unqualified promise, so that before the end of the month I can safely tell Arthur they are engaged. Any kind of engagement will serve my purpose in a degree by enabling me

to assure Arthur that she is pledged to her cousin. Even if the engagement should come to nothing, it would save me for the time, without exposing me to the risk of Arthur's contempt and anger."

Half-an-hour later as she directed her steps towards the house with the purpose of going indoors, she was so forgetful of her usual caution as to put her secret thoughts in words audible to a listener.

"Yes," she said aloud to herself, "they must marry. If he married her, I should be happy all the rest of my life."

"And whose marriage would cause you so much happiness," enquired Arthur Champion, coming upon her at a corner of the large bed of rhododendrons that had prevented her from seeing him sooner.

"Heavens, Arthur!" she exclaimed, with a quick movement of surprise. "How you startled me! Was I thinking aloud?"

"My question," he answered, with a smile that made him handsomer in her eyes than ever, "was intended as a warning; so that you might blab me no secrets unawares."

Recovering her self-command almost as soon as she had lost it, Erica replied with admirable composure,

"I was thinking, Arthur, of a subject on

which we agreed to be silent for four weeks. I was hoping you would marry Phyllis."

"And why would our marriage make you so happy?"

"Because her noble nature is incapable of small jealousies. It is natural and right you should think of marrying again. It is natural also, and not otherwise than right, that I should wish you to marry a woman who would not separate me from *my* children, or forbid you to remain my good brother."

Taking her right hand he kissed it twice, pausing between the two kisses, and then looking down tenderly upon her, he said, in a tone that made her whole body thrill with gladness,

"Little Reeka, you are a royal soul. Whatever comes, I shall always be your true brother, and you will still be a mother to *our* boy and girl."

"But we will keep to our arrangement for the month. Not another word of what may be!" she replied lightly, before she slipped from him and then went slowly towards the house.

She walked steadily from his sight; but no sooner had she escaped his gaze than her face whitened with the pain she dared not show him, and tears rose in her big, dark eyes.

"Come what may, I must wear a cheerful front in his presence," she thought, as she

moved noiselessly as a shadow up the grand staircase of her menaced home. "In the case of their marriage, I should lose my last chance of recovering him to my influence and driving her from his heart, were I to let him see or even suspect my trouble."

CHAPTER XV.

MRS. TOURNAMENT'S COMMISSION.

THOUGH she had argued boldly from scarcely sufficient data, Miss Rapier had come to right conclusions respecting the widely different characters of the two cousins and their feelings for one another; and it speaks strongly for her knowledge of human nature and nice powers of observation that she saw so clearly the qualities and relative positions of two persons with whom she was, in the ordinary sense of the words, so slightly acquainted.

Phyllis she knew from the personal observations of a single interview, from a thoughtful examination of her portrait, and from what her cousin had said of her. All her knowledge of Cyril Twyford had been gained from their conversation in a railway-carriage, the few remarks Sir Lucas Riversdale had made to the young man's discredit, and her own visit to his studio.

The little she had seen and heard of Cyril in the Isle of Wight, and her careful study of a single work of his brush, are matters that may be omitted from the survey of Miss Rapier's opportunities for ascertaining what kind of man he was. And yet she had discovered more about the two cousins than an ordinary observer would have learnt during months of familiar intimacy with them. Her conception of Phyllis Lovelock's character was perfect in respect to the forces by which she hoped to influence her course through life. Her knowledge of Cyril Twyford was far more comprehensive and complete; for the book of his life had been opened to her, and she had perused some of its most instructive pages. His worst moral infirmities had been revealed to her observation, and by them she could gauge his whole nature. She had considered the badness of his life as well as the meanness of his heart. Thinking the worst of him, she did him no injustice. Moreover, she had detected the poverty and other domestic embarrassments that would have put him very much in her power, even if he had not been vain, selfish, and unscrupulous.

Had Phyllis known all that could be truly alleged to her cousin's shame, he would still have been an object of her affectionate concern.

Slow to discover evil, she was yet slower to censure the doers of it. In this respect the woman differed in no degree from the girl who had called charity the justice we owe to others. If wickedness was charged against anyone in her hearing, she would say, "There may be some mistake; on inquiry accusations are often found to be groundless." On being assured the evidence against the culprit was conclusive, she would plead, "As he is not here, let us be his defenders." Told that the case was indefensible, she would urge, "Then the case can prove itself, and we are not required to prosecute." At a later stage of the proceedings she would argue, "Even so, we may not deliver judgment till we know what the offender can say in extenuation of his misconduct." Not that she trifled with her conscience, and played at cross purposes with her moral sense.

She was no woman to shut her eyes to the truth because it was painful. Still less was she the woman to imagine she could extinguish a light by simply shutting her eyes. Others might try to conceal unpleasant facts by ignoring them. Her function, discharged with never-failing modesty and in total unconsciousness of the sacredness of her office, was to put miserable truths in proper moral perspective, and show their relation to other truths too often

overlooked by the censorious. Her repugnance to sin was always active, but it was weaker than her compassion for sinners. She never attempted to explain away the evidences of guilt, but she could not think punishment was all that humanity owed a culprit. She would plead in the sinner's behalf, "One may not forget the circumstances that denied him the pleasure of goodness, by afflicting him with an ancestral propensity to evil or in some other way exposing him to temptations beyond his powers of resistance." In respect to the evil doer, in whose interest these considerations could not be effectively urged, her sternest utterance was, "Oh, the pity of it!" Even in its most repulsive forms, wickedness was to her a disease for which the sufferer should have everyone's pity save his own. Let it not be imagined that she was given to preaching. Her spirit was absolutely pure of self-esteem. Had she ever caught herself preaching, she would have stopped suddenly and blushed for her presumption. She seemed to be repeating a lesson for her own good, rather than a precept for the edification of her auditors, whenever she was heard to say, "One's own sin is hateful; the sins of others are matters for our compassion."

Such a woman would have abounded with excuses for Cyril Twyford's worst acts and

vilest qualities, had she known of them. The story of his life would have made her shudder, but it would not have caused her to fly from him in terror, or hardened her heart towards him. Perhaps it would have quickened and deepened her affection for him. But she knew nothing worse of him than his indiscretions and venial weaknesses. She was aware that his want of success in his profession was chiefly due to lack of industry. It had come to her ears that he had lost some of his patrimony in luckless speculations, and squandered more of it on costly amusements. Aunt Tournament spoke of him solemnly but not unkindly as a man who was "too fond of pleasure;" and with all her innocence, Phyllis had a vague consciousness that this euphemism covered tastes and practices about which she had better not be inquisitive. But if anyone had brought her a rumour of his extreme badness, she would have called the rumour a calumny, and thought its bearer an unwise busy-body. It was not in her nature to think coldly of him, because he had been (to use her own word) "unfortunate." Nothing could have made her indifferent to the cousin whom in former time she regarded with an affection that had almost warmed and ripened into "love,"—the cousin, moreover, who was her only near kinsman.

Most readers of this page have heard of Rushton Reeve. Some of them have perhaps fallen into the common mistake of confounding him with Randal Reeve, the famous historian of "The Literature of the Middle Ages," with whom Rushton had nothing in common but his surname. An antiquary of some discernment and considerable local knowledge, Rushton Reeve was no great scholar; and, though he has not quite passed from the lips of men, he can scarcely be called famous. But as a connoisseur and man of letters, who gained admission to half a dozen Learned Societies, he was in his day a notability beyond the bounds of his proper shire in the west of England, and a personage of the first mark at Hartrest, where he was a banker long before the tranquil little borough sent Arthur Champion to the House of Commons. Regarded as a man of business, he must be pronounced a failure; for, though his death at middle age saved him from the insolvency that would have befallen him at seventy, his estate yielded only three or four thousands a-piece to his three surviving children,—Maud, Clarina, and Phyllis.

Fortunately for these three ladies, who had been the brightest belles of their particular neighbourhood, they were fairly well married at the time of their father's death,—Maud to

Lieutenant-colonel Tournament of the 4th Lancers, who subsequently rose to the rank of major-general, Clarina to Ambrose Twyford the sculptor, and Phyllis to Captain Lovelock, R.N. Of General Tournament it is enough to say that he was idolized by his gentle and always delicate wife, who, on his death without issue, settled at Ryde in the villa to which she gave a name, significant of her feeling that, though only in her fortieth year, she had entered the evening of her days.

Drawn together by marriage, John Lovelock and Ambrose Twyford (the only issue of their respective parents) became close friends after the sailor's retirement from "the service." Living in London, they saw one another almost daily, so long as their wives remained in this world; and when they became widowers they kept house together in Devonshire Street, Portland Place, till the captain went to the undiscovered world, leaving his little girl to the care of her Aunt Tournament. The mutual affection of these two brothers-in-law was remarkable, their enthusiastic admiration of one another being scarcely less comical than pleasant. Cyril Twyford was not wrong when he spoke of them flippantly as "a pair of romantic old boys." And one of their romantic schemes was that their children should marry. How

the captain delighted in the thought of this marriage to his last day may be imagined by the kissing-scene (as Cyril called it) that took place at the foot of his bed only a few hours before his death.

In his latest years, however, Ambrose Twyford found more disquiet than pleasure in this romantic project. Known in the studios for the strength of his political convictions and theological fervour, the sculptor was distinguished in private life by manners that gained him a reputation for an almost puritanical severity. A Tory in politics and an enthusiast in matters pertaining to religion, he was a staunch (some said an intolerant) adherent of the Church of England; and he had a strong desire that his only child should enter the ranks of the clergy, whom he honoured with an almost superstitious reverence. Had Cyril run the course marked out for him by a fond father, he would have been the captain of his school, a first-class man at Oxford, and a famous preacher before he was five and thirty.

Though it can scarcely be said to have killed him, parental mortification and anxiety certainly shortened the days of the sculptor, whose closing hours were divided between terrifying apprehensions for his son's future and deep concern for his old friend's daughter.

"Save that dear girl from the marriage I and her father planned for her," he said to Mrs. Tournament, with almost his latest breath, "unless my poor boy amends his ways, and by God's mercy becomes a good man."

CHAPTER XVI.

A DORMANT TITLE.

In accordance with this solemn and sorrowful mandate, Mrs. Tournament used her influence to defeat a project which she had never favoured. But in doing so she acted with characteristic delicacy and caution. Even if Cyril's conduct had afforded the lady a good pretext for excluding him from her house, she would have refrained from a step so likely to confirm his power over Phyllis by causing her to think him harshly treated. Aware that the mere suspicion of her purpose might stir his masculine perversity, so that he would make the girl an offer out of sheer combativeness, she allowed him to visit "Evensong" whenever he liked, and approach Phyllis with undiminished freedom. To keep them in ignorance of her design, the prudent aunt even permitted the cousins to walk and drive and make sketching excursions by themselves. But all the

while she pursued with equal tact and temper the course that was most likely to result in the eventual separation of the young people.

Retaining much of her early beauty, and possessing the same charms of voice and manner that were so noticeable in her niece, Maud Tournament never allowed her ill health to depress her companions. Brave as she was gentle, she differed from most invalids in the marvellous lightness of her spirits. The obscure, nervous malady, which at times deprived her of the power of walking, subjected her to frequent attacks of acute headache. Indeed, she seldom passed a day without a paroxysm of headache that would have forced screams of torture from a patient of only common fortitude. But her anguish during these almost daily visitations of neuralgia was shown by nothing but the unusual pallor of her countenance and the twitching of her thin, bloodless lips; and as soon as the agony of a seizure ended, she would exhibit her relief in words of naïve drollery and almost girlish playfulness. The courage and sufferings of the martyr, who repaid so agreeably the sympathy she never exacted, but rather seemed to avoid and deprecate, could not fail to touch the heart and win the admiration of the girl who owed her aunt much gratitude for long years of maternal service and devotion.

In Phyllis Lovelock's judgment her aunt was the purest being that ever on English soil endured smilingly the sharpest sorrows of womankind. The aunt was no less certain that her tranquilly joyful Phyllis possessed every grace and virtue possible to a girl so little acquainted with grief. To realize the intercourse of these women, the reader should for a moment forget the difference of ages. Had they been twin sisters, their mutual sympathy and confidence could scarcely have been more perfect. Phyllis had no single reserve from Maud. With the single exception of her determination to keep her darling from marrying Cyril Twyford, Mrs. Tournament had no secret from Phyllis. And this one secret caused the aunt a curious sense of shame. At times she felt guilty of something like treachery in having such a reserve from her most intimate friend. At other times the secret troubled her conscience in another way. Maud Tournament was a marvel of goodness. But even her pure nature had an alloy of selfishness; and she was too honest to be unaware that she was well pleased to have so good a reason for drawing Phyllis away from Cyril and keeping her for herself. Had Cyril been faultless, Maud Tournament would not have given him her treasure freely and ungrudgingly.

And whilst by countless artifices of affection she was nursing and strengthening her influence over Phyllis, with the clear and steady purpose of using it against her nephew, should he ever lay claim to his cousin on the strength of the old family compact, Mrs. Tournament let Cyril go his own way, hoping that it would not bring him often to "the island." Without assuming an attitude of hostility towards him, she contrived to put him at a distance from her. When it pleased him to come within her bounds on the strength of an old general invitation, she received him with matter-of-course civility rather than familiar affectionateness; and when he turned his back on Evensong, he did so without being pressed to stay longer. Of course she never reminded him of "the project" which she recollected only with annoyance—a project of which *he* had been cognizant from his boyhood, though it had never been expressly submitted to his cousin's consideration. Indeed she avoided speaking with him about Phyllis, or anything that concerned her especially. She never consulted him, as her nearest living kinsman, about any of her own affairs; and though she noticed that his visits to Evensong were made at longer and longer intervals, she never rallied him on their infrequency.

But she now and then reminded Phyllis how much less they saw of him than formerly. In doing so, Mrs. Tournament was of course too prudent to complain of Cyril for neglecting them, or to suggest it would be better either for him or them that he came to Ryde oftener. But though she touched lightly on this subject as a matter of no importance, the lady's words were designed to impress on her hearer that Evensong and its inmates had ceased to be a chief interest with the young artist.

A panic seized Maud Tournament's heart when, after an absence of nine full months, Cyril appeared at Ryde and took his cousin's likeness. But the alarm passed quickly; and when the artist had gone back to London with the unfinished picture, the aunt reflected complacently on several incidents of the short visit, which confirmed her in her opinion that he had given up all thought of marrying Phyllis.

In this opinion, however, Mrs. Tournament was greatly mistaken. From the day when he determined to amuse himself with "seeing life' in the company of "fast men," till his cousin should be marriageable, Cyril Twyford had never ceased to regard Phyllis as a young person in whom he had a property, by virtue of the project for her matrimonial settlement,

which had been fully and particularly offered to his ambition on the eve of his first going to Oxford. Doubtless there had since then been times when it seemed to him highly improbable that he should ever care to wed her. But throughout his long course of profligacy he had looked upon her and her fortune of twelve thousand pounds as an estate to which he had an indefeasible title that, having fallen into abeyance through his laches, would revive whenever he should think right to assert it.

In his changeful moods, begotten of self-esteem and dissipation, she had lived by turns in his imagination, as the simple child whom he would raise to honour, the country girl who would make him a sufficient wife when he had educated her up to his standard of worldliness, the charming toy who would amuse him when he had grown weary of other playthings, the good angel who would lure him from violent wickedness to wholesome virtue, the patient waiter on his will who would eventually extricate him from his embarrassments and restore him to easy circumstances. During the last four or five years, as his professional prospect darkened, and his patrimony slipped faster from his fingers, he had more often regarded her as "the fund in reserve" that would give him another start and chance in life.

But, in whatever light he regarded her, he was never troubled by a fear that she would decline to fulfil her part of the "old project," whenever he should be ready to do his part for its accomplishment. He had no doubt that in a tranquil and undemonstrative way she was completely devoted to him, and that, whilst ministering with commendable cheerfulness to her invalid aunt, she looked forward to marriage with him on Mrs. Tournament's release from earthly troubles. In this conviction he was strengthened by her refusal of several offers, anyone of which would doubtless have satisfied her ambition, if her affections had not been pre-occupied.

Misadventures at Homburg and elsewhere having reduced Mr. Twyford to urgent distress at the time of Miss Rapier's first visit to his studio, he had for some weeks been thinking he had better annex Phyllis and her possessions without waiting for Mrs. Tournament's death. The pensive sadness that Erica remarked in his countenance was indeed chiefly due to the worry and trouble, inevitable to a gentleman of fine sensibility, who is debating how to withdraw from a domestic entanglement, so that he may form a more profitable alliance.

CHAPTER XVII.

UNDER DISCIPLINE.

When she paid her next visit to 7A, Fitzroy Square, Erica Rapier wore a rich dress of brown silk, and brought with her a small case, containing some ornaments and a few articles of millinery. On entering the studio she had the appearance of a lady in a handsome carriage costume, but on coming from the screened corner, which had been provided for her convenience with a table and looking-glass, she was in an evening toilet suitable to a gentlewoman of her years and thorny experiences. Though he would have preferred a less sombre robe, and obtained permission to imagine it a deep dead-leaf silk, the artist was well pleased with the fluffy dishevelment of the dark hair, and saw at a glance that he could make a striking picture of his unconventional patroness.

Life had become brighter in the last twenty-four hours to Mr. Cyril Twyford, who had received the money for his Academy picture, and was sure of two hundred guineas for the commission that had come to him so unexpectedly. If he humoured Miss Rapier into spending another hundred guineas on some of his water-colour sketches, he would be able to pacify his

most importunate creditors, and towards the end of July might try his luck again at the Baden-Baden tables. In the meantime he would be cultivating the acquaintance of a bright, chatty, charming gentlewoman, about whose wealth and social position he had already gained cheering information.

Few women excelled Miss Rapier in the art of pleasing men, when she had attained her forty-third year. Aware that shyness is perhaps more common in the sterner than in the gentler sex, she knew how to deal with the reserve that is often mistaken for coldness, though it is only the manner with which a nervous man masks his *mauvaise honte.* To bashful men her cordial frankness, rising sometimes to audacious freedom of speech, was delightfully re-assuring. At the same time she could hold saucy talkers well in hand, and control them with an authoritative air that was extremely piquant and always innocent of pugnacity. She won the confidence of men who never for an instant thought of loving her. She could unlock the secret chambers of a schemer's breast without letting him hear the key turn. With this faculty, which developed itself only in her middle age, the mature Miss Rapier could have easily mated herself to rank and wealth. But the woman who loved the man she might

not wed could not brook the thought of marrying anyone else.

The inmost recesses of Cyril Twyford's heart being as obvious and easily opened as the lockless drawers of an ordinary writing desk, Miss Rapier had no difficulty in getting from his own lips all that she wanted to know of his character, position, and aims. A more manageable creature had never come under her treatment.

In her opening "moves" she exercised caution and delicacy, lest her inquisitiveness should rouse his suspicion and put him on guard; but as soon as she had felt her ground, she went forward with quick and fearless steps. Coming to the studio every other day, and making on each occasion a stay of at least three hours, she had ample time for her purpose, and she used her opportunities so skilfully that in the course of a fortnight she and Cyril were curiously confidential to one another. On his side the communicativeness was without a reserve.

The tenor of his confessions certainly did not raise him in Erica's esteem. Some of them quickened her repugnance to him. But no movement of her features betrayed even for an instant that he had shocked her, or enlarged her knowledge of masculine wickedness. Taking his most discreditable revelations as mere

matters of course, she replied to them with a cynical humour that made Cyril despair of surprising her. Having verified her instinctive suspicions respecting the parentage of the little boy who ran into the studio on the occasion of her first visit, Miss Rapier expressed a wish to see the child's mother, and after a brief conflict with the artist actually induced him to bring her and the woman together for a few minutes' chat.

"Doubtless she was very pretty when you first picked her up," Erica remarked coolly to the artist, after her brief interview with this woman, who was vastly delighted by Miss Rapier's cordially courteous demeanour. "Of course it would be an insult as well as an injustice to your cousin to say she might be mistaken for the lady who has just left us. But they have a certain general resemblance."

"You think so?" said Cyril, blushing and looking slightly indignant and miserably out of countenance.

"Mrs. Twyford (I suppose she is allowed to call herself Mrs. Twyford) has something of your cousin's profile and figure. They are of the same height also. I daresay you used Mrs. Twyford for your model when you were finishing 'The Rose without a Thorn.'"

"She is is an excellent model, and appears in

several of my figure-pictures," returned Mr. Cyril Twyford, avoiding the disagreeable question. "As I told you, she was a professional model before she came to live here; and she could still live by her old calling, though her shape is not quite all that it was."

"Her figure of course never had the style, the grace, the charm, the spirit of Phyllis Lovelock's presence," remarked Miss Rapier, still harping on a subject that was obviously distasteful to her companion.

"My cousin is a gentlewoman, Miss Rapier," answered the artist, with some stateliness and show of manly feeling, "and therefore her beauty has qualities one would not look for in a model."

"But the resemblance must have struck you?" insisted Miss Rapier.

"I wish it had escaped your notice," retorted the artist.

"Then we will say no more about it at present."

"Or at any time, if you please, Miss Rapier." After nettling him to a degree, that convinced her he was earnest almost to anger, from a feeling that his dignity was touched by this comparison of the cousin he meant to marry with the mistress whom he meant to discard, Miss Rapier dropped the subject. But

though she said no more on the offensive topic, she resolved to keep the resemblance in her memory as a fact that might be useful in the future.

Nor was this the only occasion on which Miss Rapier irritated the artist into a pet, rising almost to passion. Her dexterous management of her plaything was attended with several tiffs that afforded Erica a yet clearer view of his infirmities, and at the same time gave their intercourse a zest of peril that made it the more appetizing. Flattering him a great deal, she snubbed him occasionally. Twice or thrice she flattered and snubbed almost in the same breath. For instance, after spending an hour in looking over his folios of water-colour sketches, she was pleased to remark,

"They are all clever. The man who can paint so well ought to have done something."

"'Tis something to have produced those sketches," Cyril protested uppishly.

"It is not right you should be a failure; Nature did not mean you to be a failure," continued Miss Rapier.

"You are very good to say so; but I would rather go without your sympathy than have such disdainful pity."

"I am not pitying you. You misunderstand

me. I am only angry and indignant at your circumstances."

"You were considerate enough to call me a failure."

"A *social* failure;—that was all I meant."

"Success, they say, comes to those who deserve it. Perhaps I have all the success I merit."

"But you haven't, and that's what makes me feel and speak so warmly!" exclaimed Miss Rapier, with fervour that made her eyes brighten, as though they would be tearful in another half minute. "You should have been taken into the Academy years since, instead of being still an outsider to be hung in the condemned cell. You should be famous, instead of barely known beyond 'the cliques.' You should have the world at your feet, instead of living like a broken Bohemian in this dingy, grimy, out-of-the-way square. Society suffers when men like you live from hand to mouth in holes and corners, poor and unrecognized. Nature never meant you to spend the best years of your life in this sordid fashion, unhonoured and neglected. Something should be done to put you in proper position and light."

Having delivered these sentiments in a gusty and impulsive manner, as though they were an unpremeditated outpouring of emotion, Miss

Rapier turned abruptly from the artist and his folios, and moved towards the door so quickly that Mr. Cyril Twyford had scarce enough time to open it for her.

"Pardon me if I have spoken too plainly," she said, shaking his hand with even more than her usual cordiality, as her ponies, after coming from the other side of the square, drew up before her. "I fear I have offended you."

"You have only given me cause to thank you for expressions of sympathy that I would gladly hear again," answered Cyril Twyford, as he led the lady to her carriage.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CO-OPERATION.

Cyril Twyford returned to his work-room with a strong impression that Miss Rapier had cut their conference abruptly in the middle, and gone off without making the beneficial proposal she was on the point of submitting to his consideration. His ears still tingled under her scorching reflections on his social failure, but he was consoled for the annoyance by a conviction that she would soon follow up her unpleasant remarks with practical suggestions for immediate escape from his embarrassments. She

had also strengthened his suspicion that her strong and sudden interest in his fortunes was not unselfish, and that, whilst displaying so much curiosity respecting his circumstances, she was debating how to use him and them for the accomplishment of an object hitherto undeclared.

Naturally therefore he looked forward to her next visit with impatience, and was not surprised by anything she said in the earlier part of a conversation to be recorded in the present chapter.

"Since I ran off so suddenly the other day," she remarked, after giving the artist a seventh sitting for the portrait, nearly finished by this time, with the exception of the background and certain details that would not require the lady's presence, "I have been thinking a great deal about you."

"Would that I deserved all the thought you are good enough to bestow on me, Miss Rapier."

"I meant every word I said."

"You were too obviously in earnest for me to have any doubt of your sincerity."

"The time has come for you to change your way of life, if you would win the position to which your abilities entitle you."

"You might have said that to me years since."

"Fortunately the time for remedial measures has not passed. You are too old for an aspirant, but you are still young enough to put yourself right with the world, and gain its recognition."

"My case, then, is not desperate?"

"It *will* be desperate in another year or two, if you remain here and persist in your indiscretions. You should leave these Bohemian quarters. You have stayed too long in these raffish, dingy chambers. Artists who would rise to wealth and dignity may not linger now-a-days in Fitzroy Square and the New Road. The fogs, and dirt, and remoteness of this neighbourhood are not the only reasons for its bad name. You should have a house and studio in St. John's Wood or Kensington."

"You speak as though I were a married man."

"I speak as though you should marry at once. If you take my advice yon will put an end at once to your temporary arrangement with the woman I saw the other day. Such arrangements are apt to become permanent. Dispose of her in the usual way, and marry Phyllis Lovelock before the end of the year."

"Mrs. Tournament might object to that."

"Anyhow, you should make your cousin an offer, and bind her to you by a definite engagement."

"We are as good as engaged. She is not unmindful of the old understanding."

"In love affairs definite engagements often drop into old understandings, and so come to nothing, but it is rare for a mere understanding to develop in the course of long years into an engagement that eventuates in marriage."

"But my position to Phyllis is peculiar."

"Much too peculiar, Mr. Twyford, to be so safe as you imagine. She may slip from your fingers even while we are talking. You are in a bad plight; you have been in a sorry plight for many a day. To save yourself from worse trouble—to save yourself from slow, sure, infamous ruin—you should not live another week without extorting a promise of marriage from your cousin; and you should induce her to fulfil the promise in the autumn."

"It is impossible for me to move so quickly. Several things must be done before I can marry. My present position is not one from which a poor man can retreat in a moment."

"That I understand. Some permanent provision must be made for Mrs. Twyford and her child. You could not ask her to resume her former calling (though it is a perfectly proper one for a person of her sort!); you could not bid her good-bye, and tell her to shift for herself, without giving her a handsome present. You

must give her a thousand pounds in her own hands, or an allowance of a hundred a year, secured to her so long as she lives quietly, and does not trouble you. Some provision should be made for her child's education and sufficient establishment in life."

"You realize my position perfectly. If it were your own, you would feel its burdens and difficulties more painfully, but you could not see them more clearly."

"Sacrifices must be made, no doubt, if you would escape the most urgent consequences of your indiscretions; if you would retrieve your social status, and marry Phyllis Lovelock."

"And at present, my dear Miss Rapier," said Cyril Twyford, with dismal lightness, "this wretched man can make no substantial sacrifices. His sensibilities are the most valuable of his earthly possessions. His feelings are all that he could sacrfice at the present moment."

"You could not raise much on *them*," returned the lady, in a business-like tone that would have won a smile of approval from Barnaby Rennard of Liverpool, had he been alive to hear them.

"Let us dismiss this distressing subject," cried Cyril, passing in a trice from flippancy to wailing. "To look my difficulties in the face, even for a moment, is to grow desperate. So long as I don't contemplate them seriously,

I can think some strange freak of fortune may liberate me from them. But as soon as I begin to realize the burden and shame and enormity of my involvements, I see no better means of escaping them than a loaded pistol."

"You sha'n't try that remedy yet."

"I may try it sooner than you imagine."

"'Tis more likely fortune may take the strange turn, and give you happiness, or at least contentment."

"Fortune! She has deceived me too often. I was doomed to die of misadventure. It is useless to fight against fate."

"Then don't resist me," said Miss Rapier cheerily, "for I am your fate."

"Don't play with me."

"All you need to set you straight is money. Well, it is my humour,—nothing more, only my humour,—to play the part of a Good Providence to you. 'Tis a humour I am rich enough to gratify. Now, don't fume and talk grandly about your honour forbidding you to accept services from a woman. If you wish me to break with you, try my temper with that kind of masculine insolence. Moreover, I won't gall your pride by pressing gifts upon you. Regard any money I put at your disposal as mere payment beforehand for services you will render me in the way of your profession. I

will look to it that you repay me with pictures to my mind. For the rest, reward me by letting me rule you for the next few months. I am bent on marrying you to Phyllis Lovelock. I mean you to marry her before the end of the year; I mean you to make her an offer before another week has passed."

"What an unaccountable, inexplicable creature you are!"

"To you, doubtless, I am inscrutable—for I am your Providence. Be compliant, and you will find me a kindly fate; resist me, and I will prove your evil Destiny. At present, I certainly show no signs of malice; for I only urge you to do good unto yourself, and am ready to help you to the desire of your heart. Come, here is an offer:—tell me on or before the last day of next week that Phyllis has promised to marry you, and I will at once lend you a thousand pounds. Marry her before the end of the year, and I will lend you ten thousand. Both loans to be repaid at your convenience with works of your brush."

"What can make you thus desirous I should marry Phyllis, and marry her so soon?" cried Mr. Cyril Twyford, in his excitement walking away from Miss Rapier, who, like him, was alternately seated and on her feet throughout this strange interview.

"Why be curious respecting the motives of your Providence!"

"My Providence! In respect to mystery you play your part completely. The Sphynx is not more perplexing and inscrutable! What are you after?" he asked impetuously, returning to her chair with long paces, and then confronting her.

"Your good!" answered Miss Rapier jollily.

"What else?"

"My pleasure."

"Let me know it."

"Beneficence,—the purest of all pleasures."

"Nonsense! Even for my own good, I won't be a mere blind puppet in your hands. Let me know what you want, and why you want it, and I will serve you to the best of my power. If we can act together for our common advantage, let us help one another. But be frank. Don't insult the man, whom you offer money in thousands, by withholding your confidence from him."

"Surely my obvious motives are sufficient to account for my action! Why speak so disdainfully of my apparent beneficence when I would do you kindness?"

"You are not acting from benevolence towards me. If your offers proceeded from such a motive, your tenderness for me would closely

resemble love. But you have not even a liking for me. I rather think you dislike me."

"You have a clearer perception of my feelings than I supposed. I have no tenderness for you; you have amused and interested me, but I am conscious of almost disliking you. Still, though you have not won either my respect or my sympathy, you are a man with whom I would co-operate for our common advantage. It is as much to my interest as for your own that you should marry your cousin."

"What interest can you have in the matter?"

"Just this,—if you don't marry Phyllis speedily, she will marry the man whom I would prevent her from marrying. You are so secure of her affection as to think her incapable of accepting anyone else, so long as she retains the faintest hope of winning you. I don't want to wound your self-love, or lower Phyllis Lovelock in your esteem; but I am sure you rate your influence over her too highly, though I have no doubt you could win her even *now*, if you entreated her vehemently and passionately to give herself to you. Persuade her that throughout your frivolous career she has been your one true love, and that she alone can raise you to honour; make her believe this, and even yet she may become your wife. But wait till your rival has poured his song of supplication

into her ears, and you will pray to her in vain."

"Tell me something about my rival. Who is he? What is his name? What is he like?" said Cyril Twyford, glancing with manifest self-approval at the mirror over his mantelpiece as he put the last question.

Though the apparent freedom and heedlessness of her speech and manner in her successive interviews with the artist might seem to indicate want of forethought and caution, Miss Rapier's treatment of Cyril Twyford had been duly considered. Even her lightest remarks had been made with premeditation and purpose, and no one of their conversations had taken a turn for which she was unprepared. Instead of being surprised at his curiosity respecting the man who might win Phyllis Lovelock's heart, she had anticipated it, and decided beforehand how far she should gratify it. Indeed, in the absence of any such curiosity, she had predetermined to give the information which opportune inquiries now elicited. For, in putting limits to her communicativeness, she never thought of protecting herself from his ridicule. Having condescended to use a tool, she was content to put herself more or less in the tool's power. Provided she could use Mr. Cyril Twyford effectively for her particular purpose by making him fearful of losing Phyllis,

it mattered not to Miss Rapier that he laughed at her in his sleeve for being a madly foolish and jealous old maid.

"This will give you a notion what he is to look at," she said, taking from the pocket of her brown silk skirt a beautifully painted, full-length miniature of her brother-in-law.

"By my word, a handsome gentleman! A brow, a profile, a mouth to be remembered! The dark curls over the high forehead look vastly well!" exclaimed the artist with evident sincerity, as he examined the best piece of work ever elaborated by the cleverest miniature-painter of his day. "And who may be this fine gentleman?"

"Mr. Arthur Champion, Member of Parliament for Hartrest."

"Your brother-in-law?"

"My brother-in-law."

"The gentleman who bought my Academy picture?"

"I have only one brother-in-law. His wife, dead years since, was my only sister."

"This thing was done only a few years ago. How old is he?"

"No older than that likeness to look at, though he lived and worked hard in India for more than twenty years. He is no older than you in appearance, though doubtless ten or

fifteen years your senior by the parish register."

"Of course he has other attractions besides those of appearance."

"Scholar, poet, wit, he is the delight of every company he enters. He does not dazzle; he does not even sparkle; yet his conversational tact is the most charming of his gifts. Does Phyllis honour money?"

"She is a woman."

"Does she honour rank?"

"What woman does not honour it?"

"Probably she won't be the less inclined to think well of my brother-in-law, because he is rich and of good family. Should a certain sickly and unmarried gentleman die next month, Mr. Arthur Champion would succeed at once to a baronetcy and a landed estate in Somersetshire."

"But where and how often have he and Phyllis met?"

"I am not aware she has ever seen him."

"Then where has he seen her?"

"At present he has never seen her."

"No great harm, then, has been done at present."

"But you must be quick, if you would not have him capture Phyllis. As soon as he saw her portrait (her picture to the veriest breath of her life) he bought it, *not* for your art's sake,

but solely for her beauty's sake. Fool that I am, I told him it was the portrait of a girl I once met in the Isle of Wight; told him her name and address. There's no need to tell you any more. You see the whole case. Of course, he vows to seek her out, get an introduction to her, and make her his second wife."

"In which case you would lose the pleasure of his society. It is clear, Miss Rapier, why you have never married!" cried Cyril Twyford banteringly.

"What blockhead couldn't see the reason when I had told it him as plainly as I have told it to you?" retorted Miss Rapier, in a voice that was a fit sequel to the flash of scornful contempt that preluded the words.

"Pardon me, my dear madam!" exclaimed the artist, scarcely less terrified than startled by the sudden outbreak of strong feeling.

"That's done! It is easy for me to pardon *you!*" she returned less fiercely, but no less scornfully. "I shall find it more difficult to pardon myself! But I could scarcely say less to make you realize all your danger, all *my* danger, all *our* danger!"

"Which you magnify. Indeed you magnify it, my dear Miss Rapier."

"Tell me so when you have provided against it."

"Rely on me to take precautions."

"Immediately?"

"As soon as they have returned to Ryde. Let the matter rest till then. I must have Phyllis alone for half-an-hour. At Inverness Terrace, where they have only one sitting-room, I could not see her, except in Aunt Tournament's presence. They will be leaving town in a day or two, and I will follow them quickly to 'Evensong.' Rely on me to keep my promise."

"Let us shake hands!" cried Erica Rapier, in the most cordial of all her strong voices.

"By the end of next week," said Cyril Twyford, as he pressed her firmly pressing hand, "I shall come back with the good news, and ask for my reward."

"Bring me the good news, and you sha'n't have to ask for the thousand pounds," returned Miss Rapier. "Now take me to my carriage."

CHAPTER XIX.

A CHARITY SERMON.

DESTINY must have been in it that Arthur Champion, who had lived for years without glancing at the advertisements of the daily papers, passed his eye carelessly over a particu-

lar column of the *Times* on the very morning when it contained an announcement that James Wilbraham, D.D., Lord Bishop of Eastminster, would on the ensuing Sunday preach at the church of St. Trinity, Paddington, for the benefit of the Royal Bunion Hospital in Fetter Lane, Holborn. Fate must have been controlling the probabilities and possibilities of Arthur Champion's life, that on reading this advertisement it flashed upon him how his father-in-law had in former time laboured for the foundation and maintenance of this same charitable institution. Fate surely was working for ends unimagined by the Chief Secretary of the Indian Intelligence Department, or he, little given to worship bishops, would not forthwith have conceived a desire to hear what the most eloquent and courtly prelate of his generation could say in behalf of the hospital to which Miss Rapier of Regent's Park was still a contributor.

It was something more than accident that, instead of consenting to accompany her brother-in-law to hear the famous preacher plead for the footsore, Miss Rapier preferred to attend the morning service at St. John's Wood Chapel, and let Mr. Champion go to the Paddington church by himself.

Anyhow, on the Sunday next following his

purchase of "The Rose without a Thorn," Mr. Champion went to St. Trinity's Church without his sister-in-law, and, on leaving the sacred building, had reason to congratulate himself in being free to go whither he pleased, instead of being under an obligation to escort Miss Rapier to their home in Regent's Park. On returning to Thurlow Lodge he proved strangely forgetful of the sermon, when Erica, after remarking on the lateness of his re-appearance, asked what he had heard to his edification from episcopal lips. He remembered that the orator had taken for his text, "Neither delighteth he in any man's legs." But how the bishop developed the hidden force of these words, so as to draw tears and guineas from his auditors, Mr. Champion could not say, although at the opening of his examination he declared that he had been profoundly stirred by an address which, in logical structure and musical solemnity of utterance, surpassed his expectations.

"Bless the man!" thought Miss Rapier, when by half a dozen questions she had detected the emptiness of the impostor's professions. "His head was so full of his precious 'ideal' and of Phyllis Lovelock's picture, that the sermon, so far as *he* was concerned, might just as well have been preached by the bishop's butler! What a fine thing it is to be a man! Were I a

lord of human kind, with 'pride in my port and defiance in my eye,' instead of being an unappreciated, disappointed, bitter old maid, I too might be going wild about a piece of painted canvas."

The case was far more serious than the lady imagined. Having entered the church only just in time for the beginning of the service, Mr. Champion had not been ten minutes in possession of the place to which he was conducted by a lean widow of sorrowful aspect and fuscous raiment, when his attention was seized by the elegant figure of a young gentlewoman standing some twelve feet away from him. Separated from this lady by the principal avenue of the church, and having his seat in a row behind her pew, Mr. Champion had caught only a back view of her light bonnet, and white lace shawl, and silk dress of deepest blue, when he was first attracted by her graceful stature. Not much above the middle height, she looked taller because she was surrounded by some exceptionally short people, and stood by the side of a lady who kept her seat, when the congregation rose to chant the "Te Deum laudamus."

To Mr. Champion it was obvious that the sitting lady was an invalid; and from the way in which the particular object of his consideration stood and inclined slightly towards the

seated worshipper, he had no doubt that the wearer of the summerly shawl and dark-blue silk regarded the invalid with the tenderness of affectionate solicitude. Of course it was a mere fancy that he could distinguish the younger lady's voice from the full, rolling melody in which it was completely lost. But he had good cause to start with sudden surprise when, with one voice, the multitude made its entreaty, "O Lord, in Thee have I trusted; let me never be confounded." For at those last words of the noble canticle, the lady turned slightly towards her companion, so as to afford Mr. Arthur Champion a momentary glimpse of a profile, every curve of which had long been familiar to him.

Shortly afterwards, when his section of the congregation faced about to say the creed, he turned to the east with a slowness that enabled him for a few brief seconds to get a full view of the face whose profile had caused him so much astonishment. The full view having satisfied the expectations resulting from the side glance, Mr. Champion would have been more devout than prudent had he neglected to get another direct survey of the lady's countenance, when congregational decorum required them to resume the westward position. Nor will it be imputed to him for grievous unrighteousness that, from the moment of recognizing Phyllis

Lovelock, he gave little heed to the prayers and none to the sermon.

The bishop having duly pleaded for the foot-sore, and the congregation having given of their abundance to the late Mr. Doughty Rapier's hospital, it was only in accordance with man's insidious ways and universal wiliness that the member of Parliament for Hartrest lingered in the church till Phyllis and her aunt, after listening for a few minutes to "the voluntary" of a fairly good organ and excellent organist, followed in the wake of the slowly dispersing assembly; and that he kept them well in view, whilst Mrs. Tournament was wheeled in a Bath-chair towards Kensington Gardens, under the convoy of her niece walking on one side of the chair, and a big curly-coated black dog walking on the other side of the vehicle. From some points of view it may perhaps be thought inconsistent with Mr. Champion's dignity and fine sense of honour that he could thus play the spy on two gentlewomen returning from church in the bright mid-day. But in love all things are permissible, from tossing to manslaughter; and, availing himself of the licence accorded by ancient usage to sufferers from the generous passion, Miss Rapier's brother-in-law did not allow the Bath-chair to roll from his sight till he had

seen the ladies and their big black dog enter a house at the Kensington Gardens end of Inverness Terrace.

Yet further. The ladies having at length vanished from view, Mr. Arthur Champion stopped the chair-man (a white-haired and almost venerable person in black-cloth nether integuments, and a white-cotton jacket) as he was on the point of drawing his empty machine into a by-way leading to an adjacent yard, and held with him the following conversation:

"You live near?"

"In the yard round this corner, sir."

"Perhaps you have an address-card, with your fare on it, in your pocket? I am looking out for a chair-man."

"Surely, your honour. This is my card. Half-a-crown an hour is my regular fare; but I am open to agreements by the week or the month."

"Can you refer me to any of your former employers? I should like to know something about you."

"Mrs. Cheeseman will speak for me, sir. She has known me for years. I have just come from Mrs. Cheeseman's, at the end of the terrace."

"The lady you were wheeling just now is Mrs. Cheeseman, eh?"

"Never a bit, sir! Mrs. Cheeseman doesn't want pulling about. She can walk as well as you or I. The lady I have just run home from church is Mrs. Tournament, a lady from the Isle of Wight."

"Ah! I never saw her before. But I recognized the lady's niece, Miss Phyllis Lovelock."

"The same, sir. And a sweet pair of ladies they are, sir. Lord, sir, when I am drawing Madam Tournament about 'the gardens,' Miss Lovelock will talk to me as though she wasn't a single barley-corn unequal to me. If I was her father, she couldn't talk prettier or more equal."

"She and Mrs. Tournament would give you a recommendation?"

"Sure they would, your honour. But they may be going before you could see them. It would be better for you to inquire of Mrs. Cheesman. She's my very best customer."

"Although she is in such good health?"

"Hers is a great house for invalids and ladies who want to lodge quiet. The doctors recommend her."

"Her boarding-house?"

"Her boarding and lodging-house, sir; which is the most firstest class house of the kind in Bayswater. They are always coming and going

at Mrs. Cheeseman's; and some of them are the tippest-toppest quality."

"Then I'll speak to Mrs. Cheeseman, if I don't have a word with Miss Lovelock before she leaves town. I daresay the ladies will be staying for ten days."

"Something better than a fortnight, your honour. The ladies came up for a month; and the weather is so fine, and they are enjoying theirselves that much that I don't think they'll shorten their time. They are more like to stop longer."

"Then I shall make an opportunity to call on them. Or maybe I shall come upon them some afternoon in Kensington Gardens. I walk in the gardens sometimes in the afternoon."

"But they never go there in the afternoon. Their time for 'the gardens' is from half-past ten till twelve. I draw Madam Tournament down the Broad Walk, and then she takes her bit of walking exercise under the trees, and nigh about the Round Pond. You see, sir, as Madam Tournament comes out only for the air and just to prac*tise* her feet a bit, the gardens can't be too quiet for the ladies."

"Then I shall have to look them up in Inverness Terrace," said the diplomatist, passing on when he had extracted all the infor-

mation he needed from Mrs. Cheeseman's chair-drawing *protégé*.

Mr. Champion had spent so much time in following the ladies to their door, and in gossiping with the chairman, that he would have kept his sister-in-law waiting for luncheon, even if he had hailed a passing cab and driven quickly back to Thurlow Lodge. But instead of making the homeward course with the utmost speed, he loitered leisurely to his home, thinking over his recent discoveries; considering how he should turn them to account; and debating whether he should forthwith communicate them to Erica.

On this point his deliberations ended in a resolve to withhold from Miss Rapier the adventures of the morning. They had agreed to be silent to one another about Phyllis Lovelock for a month, and nothing had occurred to make him think he would gain in any way by another breach of the compact. Erica's inquiries were still needful, for though he had learnt that Phyllis remained Miss Lovelock, he still wanted assurance that Miss Lovelock was unengaged. His diplomatic temper was pleased by the notion of making his own independent investigations in one direction, whilst his agent, without suspecting his activity, was pushing her inquiries in another. Moreover, his sense of

humour was tickled by the thought that, if he kept his own counsel, and left his sister-in-law alone, Erica's labours might bring her to the astounding discovery that Phyllis was not free to accept another offer of marriage, because she had promised to become Mrs. Arthur Champion.

If fate may not be held accountable for the decision, it was at least an accident favourable to his enterprise, that Arthur Champion determined to keep his sister-in-law ignorant that he had seen Phyllis Lovelock, and discovered her resting-place within a hundred and fifty yards of Kensington Gardens. For Miss Rapier's knowledge of human nature had enabled her to form a just estimate of Cyril Twyford's hold over his cousin's affections; and she was no less right in her conviction that the artist's power over Phyllis would be speedily consumed by her stronger interest in Arthur Champion, should the latter approach her with words of tenderly passionate entreaty, before she had given her word to be Cyril's wife. Which of the two men would win Phyllis depended on which of them should be the first to seek her love with prayers irresistible to her gentleness. It was in fact a question of time, whether John Lovelock's daughter would from pity throw herself away on a scamp sure to make her un-

utterably wretched, or from love would commit herself to a man not altogether unworthy of her devotion. And it cannot be questioned that had she learnt what steps her brother-in-law had taken in three short hours towards the achievement of his purpose, Miss Rapier would have been spurred by a yet livelier sense of danger to be even more expeditious in her measures for giving the decisive advantage to the man whose success would prevent Arthur Champion from making Phyllis an offer.

CHAPTER XX.

KENSINGTON GARDENS.

Acting on the information gained so opportunely from Mrs. Tournament's chair-man, Arthur Champion, on the morrow of his visit to Trinity Church, started immediately after breakfast for Whitehall Place, going thither by way of Kensington Gardens and the parks. But though he left Miss Rapier's door at half-past nine a.m., and took a cab to the Bayswater Road, it was noon before he reached his office; the lateness of his arrival at the place of business being due to the dilatory character of his proceedings in the gardens of the Royal Palace. Ere the week ended he had spent eighteen

hours in those sylvan grounds; and it favoured the purpose which brought him so often to the Broad Walk, that an unusually early and genial spring was closing with a May of memorable warmth and brightness.

Balmy and exhilarating, it was a May after the fashion of those vernal seasons that may be held accountable for the praises lavished by our old poets on what is often the bleakest and unkindest month of the whole year. Clothed with fresh foliage the trees of the parks were musical with jubilant birds; and though it still came lightly from the east, the wind was so soft and warm that delicate women left their furs and wraps at home on going forth in their open carriages and summer bonnets. In such weather the quietude and brightness of Kensington Gardens were no less agreeable than salutary to Maud Tournament, who, rejoicing in sunlight and shrinking from noise, was under medical advice to spend a considerable part of every day in the open air. And whilst she was well pleased to carry out the order of her physician in so picturesque a spot, Arthur Champion found it no less delightful to divert himself with watching the invalid and her two constant attendants—the girl whose footsteps seemed to his fancy to bring forth flowers from the greensward on which she walked, and the big

black dog whom he envied for being allowed to attend his mistresses openly, and honoured for the supercanine vigilance and considerateness with which he kept guard over them.

On the Monday it was enough for Mr. Champion to watch the ladies, taking note of their doings and printing each of them in his memory; and this he did the more carefully, because he felt that their procedure was probably the same on all their visits to the enclosure, and that the arrangements of to-day would be repeated on following days. His heart and feet went lightly, when he first caught sight of the Bath-chair slowly rolling at the heels of the chair-man. Taking care to keep out of the ladies' sight, and even greater care to avoid the man's eyes, Mr. Champion, walking under the shadow of the trees, kept so near the party that he once and again caught their louder words. It was no trivial matter to him that Phyllis called her dog "Max, dear old Max," and "wise Master Max," and that to each of these forms of address Max responded by throwing more vivacity into the action of his fore-legs, and tossing his clever head confidentially upwards to the speaker, uttering the while the cheeriest and most amiable "yaps."

The chair having been wheeled half way down the Broad Walk, and turned about so that

the invalid confronted the glorious sun, Max rose on his hind legs, and swaying backwards turned round on the same posterior limbs, whilst he gesticulated vehemently with his front paws, and barked authoritatively at the chairman.

"Max orders you to your bench. He'll be fearfully offended if you don't obey him, Mr. Heron!" cried Phyllis, in a tone of kindliest humour to the chair-man.

"He won't order me twice, Miss Lovelock," replied Mr. Heron, moving across "the walk" towards a bench directly opposite the carriage.

"But stay for 'the *Times*;' we have done with it. There is something more in it about the Chiddingfold Mystery in which you are so interested," said Phyllis, giving the man the paper, in spite of a loud protest from Max, who was strongly of opinion that Mr. Heron was being made too much of, and should have gone straight to his proper resting place. Having offered Mr. Heron this courtesy, Phyllis turned upon Mr. Max with words of bantering expostulation. "Come, come, sir," she said, with a laugh, "there is nothing for you to fume and bluster about in that overbearing fashion. You should not be so dictatorial. If you were clever enough to read, you would like to see the *Times* every day. What has come over you since we

came to London, to make you so arrogant? These, sir, are not your Ryde manners."

To which scolding Mr. Max responded by raising his head well up and looking his young mistress straight in the face, and saying as humanly as he could with looks and affectionate whinings, "A country dog may be pardoned for being anxious and fussy, when he has to look after two ladies in this big, strange, perplexing London."

Having made up her little difference with her dog, Phyllis went to the chair, and, taking a camp-stool from the back of the vehicle, seated herself near her aunt. Whereupon Mr. Max, seeing that the ladies wished to chat and re-read their morning's letters by themselves, walked to the middle of the wide gravel path, folded his hind legs under his body, laid his big tail straight towards Kensington, extended his fore legs in the direction of the Bayswater Road, and placed his chest and throat flat down upon the ground. And in this posture, with his right eye on the chairman (of whom, by the way, he was daily growing more jealous) and his left eye on the ladies, he remained motionless and vigilant for full ten minutes, when he came up to his senior mistress and reminded her that she had not yet taken her walking-exercise.

Acting on this suggestion, Maud Tournament left her carriage, and, leaning on her niece's arm, paced slowly on the turf for a quarter of an hour, and then went back to her seat in the hand-chaise.

The elder lady having taken this exercise, Phyllis Lovelock went off by herself for a longer and quicker walk, taking a course through the trees towards Hyde Park, and passing so near the spot from which Arthur Champion watched her that he felt it the part of courtesy as well as prudence to retreat a few paces out of her way, lest his presence should deprive her of a pleasurable sense of solitude and security from observation. Indeed, she was within twelve yards of the member for Hartrest, when, hearing Mr. Max close at her heels, she told the animal to leave her alone and go where duty called him.

"No, no, Max," she said, pausing in her progress to remonstrate with the officious guardian; "go to Aunt Tournament. You must keep watch over Maud. Be off, you silly fellow! There's no one to trouble me in this lovely place. You may trust these grand trees to take care of me. Go back, you dear old Max, and be sure I'll whistle for you if I want you."

Your large, well-bred dog is ever a gentleman in his dealings with women who know how

to appeal to his chivalric instincts; and to the command given thus gently and caressingly, Mr. Max could only yield obedience. But though he took the one course possible to a dog of his sensibility, he did not retrace his steps without showing his disapproval of the orders, and his nervous uneasiness for their fair giver. A series of faint, imperfect whining growls came from his lips as he slowly trotted to his former resting-place in the wide avenue, where he sat erect on his haunches for the next twenty minutes, listening intently for a summons from the whistle of his too adventurous mistress.

"Max is right," thought Arthur Champion, who knew dogs as thoroughly as he knew men. "His fine instinct tells him that his mistress is nearing an influence that will affect her whole future life for weal or woe."

But "the influence" was careful to give Phyllis no cause for sounding her whistle. It was enough for him to watch her taking her exercise in the adjacent glades, to see how lightly and easily she moved over the elastic turf, to observe how she glanced admiringly at the foliage above and the chequered lawns before her, to note how she stopped once and again to enjoy the music of the rustling branches, to remark how the exercise gave a brighter glow to her delicate complexion. The

delight of gazing at her was all the more vivid because it was stolen and could not endure for many minutes. But however short the clock may prove them, periods of intense emotion are always long to those who feel their joy or pain. And when the ladies, just as the palace bell struck twelve, retired from the gardens as leisurely as they had entered them, Arthur Champion felt as though his ecstasy of gladness had lasted for an entire day instead of barely ninety minutes.

The chair with its occupant, Phyllis and her dog, having passed from his view, Mr. Arthur Champion turned towards the Serpentine, happy in the memory of past pleasure, and yet happier in the assurance that the ladies would revisit the gardens on the morrow and several following days; and, as he sauntered slowly to Whitehall Place, his mind was fully occupied in thinking how on one of these subsequent mornings he could address them without an intrusiveness that would provoke their suspicion or resentment.

The question was not answered in a moment. Men of gentle breeding do not readily pick up acquaintances of their own sex in the highways. It is even more difficult for them in a public promenade to discourse with gentlewomen to whom they have not been introduced. And,

with all his ease and tact in society, Mr. Champion was not devoid of the reserve that disinclines gentlemen to force themselves on strangers. In a thoroughfare it cost him an effort to ask the way of an unknown passer; and, though he would have bestirred himself to save a drowning man without waiting for an introduction, his exertions for the victim of misadventure would not have exceeded the requirements of humanity. Could he only encounter them within the four walls of a drawing-room or a railway-carriage, he felt himself capable of luring Mrs. Tournament and her niece into conversation without the aid of a master of ceremonies. But to accost them in the Broad Walk of Kensington Gardens, in the hope of winning their favourable regard, would be a daring and perilous enterprise.

A gentleman of Mr. Champion's age and worldly experience had not to learn that every rule has its exceptions. On seeing that his purpose required him to violate a prime rule of common courtesy, he naturally asked himself what exceptional circumstances would justify the indecorum in the opinion of the two ladies. In this inquiry he was aided by recollections of former incidents of his career. But he received larger help from his accurate knowledge of a department of popular litera-

ture that, in its copious illustrations of the usages of polite society, abounds with cases where strangers of opposite sexes dispense with the forms of ceremonious introduction in making one another's acquaintance. From a philosophic consideration of such cases, to be found in the works of our best romantic writers, it became obvious to the member for Hartrest that manners were subordinate to morals, and that when a law of conventional civility defeats the object of its enactment or militates in an unusual way with supreme interests, people of right feeling should not hesitate to disregard the inconvenient rule, and terminate the conflict between etiquette and humanity.

But, though they gave him the true principle, the "cases in point" failed to give the right line of action. Not one of them even suggested a course of procedure applicable to his peculiar circumstances. Unless a sudden fit of insanity should cause Phyllis to "take a header" into the Round Pond, he could not earn her imperishable gratitude by rescuing her from a watery grave. It would not serve his purpose to set fire to Kensington Palace and cause flames to burst simultaneously from all its lower windows, unless he had first imprisoned Miss Lovelock in an upper room whence he could bear her off with unsinged

tresses at the fiercest moment of the conflagration. To get a sufficient carriage accident out of the Bath-chair it would be necessary to adulterate Mr. Heron's morning cup with a poisonous drug that should change the tranquil biped into a raging and homicidal chair-man. Even in London mad bulls cannot be procured at a moment's notice; and, if he brought so unmanageable a creature into the gardens, how could the member for Hartrest contrive that it should make an ugly rush at the ladies, so as to give him an opportunity of springing between them and the beast, and striking it dead at their feet with the adroitness of a Spanish matador. Nothing could be done for his purpose with Max, the unlikeliest of dogs to fly at his mistresses in a paroxysm of foaming rabies. Mr. Champion would have been delighted to fight an army of brigands for the protection of Phyllis and her aunt; but brigands are shut out of Kensington Gardens by the vigilance of the gate-keepers. In a different season and another place the Anglo-Indian might have arranged a hunting-accident that would make him an object of Miss Lovelock's compassionate care. Even in the Broad Walk he could simulate a paralytic seizure and fall helpless at her feet. But such a miserable piece of imposture would have no adequate result in a London

suburb; for though they would doubtless dispatch Mr. Heron promptly for assistance, the ladies would bid the paralytic farewell on the arrival of the first cab and nearest doctor.

"As the novelists won't help me, I must take counsel with myself," said Arthur Champion, as he passed through the Horse Guards towards the scene of his official labours. "In default of the romance-writers, I am left to my own resources! At present I don't see how it can be done. *This*, however, is clear to me—the first address may not come from me, but from her! If I can only lure her into giving me an opportunity for speaking, all will go smoothly. But she must afford me the opening. I mayn't speak till she has spoken."

CHAPTER XXI.

MR. MAX CONSENTS.

CENTURIES hence, when there will be no difference of opinion respecting the authorship of the Athanasian Creed, the Icôn Basilice, and the Junius Letters, it will be a moot question with literary critics whether Arthur Champion dropped his pocket-book in Kensington Gardens by accident or design.

But however they may differ on this perplex-

ing and never-to-be-settled question, all readers will concur in thinking it a most fortunate circumstance that, at 11.30 a.m. of the day immediately following the incidents recorded in the last chapter, Mr. Champion, in drawing a handkerchief from one of the pockets of his dark blue walking-coat, dropped a book in one of the glades of Kensington Gardens, as he sauntered leisurely towards the Broad Walk. They will also think it a curious occurrence that this pocket-book fell to the ground under the observant eyes of Miss Lovelock, who happened to be following in the wake of the member for Hartrest, at a distance of some twenty-five or thirty yards.

Having witnessed the accident, it was natural that, on coming to the spot where it lay, Miss Lovelock picked the book from the grass, and then asked herself how she should restore it to its owner. Should she call to the gentleman, who was now fifty yards in front of her? should she run lightly and overtake the owner of the lost property? Should she take the book to the gate-keeper? To attract the gentleman's attention by word of mouth, it would be necessary for her to raise her voice to indecorous loudness. Dignity forbade her to run in Kensington Gardens like a milk-maid racing for ribands over a village green. To

carry the book, which possibly contained valuable papers, to the park-keeper's office, was not the quickest way of returning it to the careless pedestrian who, on discovering his loss, might suffer serious mental distress.

After considering the matter for thirty seconds, Miss Phyllis Lovelock decided that she would neither cry aloud, nor run with unseemly speed, nor go to the park-keeper. A good walker, she felt sure that, by putting her best foot foremost, she could at walking pace overtake the gentleman, just as he would reach the Broad Walk. Within sight of Max, and within forty paces of her aunt's Bath-chair, she could accost the stranger without discomfort.

Hence it came to pass that, just five minutes after the book had fallen to the ground, Mr. Champion heard light steps behind him, and turned leisurely round to see whose steps they might be.

On beholding Phyllis close upon him, with her right hand extended before her, Mr. Arthur Champion drew back a full pace as he raised his hat and made her a ceremonious movement of reverence. Neither too formal nor elaborate for the occasion, the bow was made the more deliberately in order that it might give him a few additional seconds for regarding her coun-

tenance and accommodating his subsequent proceedings to its expression. The longer he held his hat in his hand, the longer might he delay to take the book she held towards him. Serviceable in this respect, the bow was successful also in affording Phyllis time to observe his looks and bearings, and satisfy herself that she was on the point of accosting a person unlikely to misconstrue her kindness or presume upon it. At a glance Phyllis recognized this stranger's social degree and something of his chivalric temper. The delicate freemasonry of air and manner proclaimed him her equal, and worthy of his rank. Before a word escaped her lips, she knew that she was going to address —a gentleman!

"I had the good fortune to see you drop this pocket-book, and I have brought it to you."

"My pocket-book!" returned Mr. Champion, with an air of incredulity, as he touched his breast-pocket to assure himself of the absence of his book.

"There is no mistake. I saw it fall."

"Unquestionably it is my book," said the member for Hartrest, speaking with singular deliberateness, as he slowly put forth his hand to receive his property. "Where *did* I drop it?"

"At the end of the narrow avenue, five or six minutes since."

"It is very fortunate for me that you found it, and it is very kind of you to take so much trouble to restore it to me."

"Don't thank me. I could not well have troubled myself less."

"Instead of hastening after me, you might have taken the book to the gate-keeper."

"That would have caused me less trouble. And I *should* have left it with the park-keeper on leaving the grounds, had it not struck me that the quickest course would be the best for you."

"It occurred to you that, if you left me to discover my loss, I might suffer annoyance and anxiety?"

"Just so."

"Hence you determined to do me a kindness as well as a service. The latter I might forget, the former I must always remember. Let me show you what I might have lost irrecoverably, had it not been for you," he added, opening the book in a way that detained Phyllis for another minute, though she had already made a slight inclination of her head as a prelude to her departure. "See, there are fifteen of those notes in that roll. A man who takes so little care of fifteen hundred pounds ought to be punished by losing them."

"The punishment would be heavier than the fault."

"But my offence shall not go unpunished. I will reward myself with the luxury of doing good. Those notes shall be taxed as though they were windfalls. The service you have done may not be only for my own benefit."

"I don't understand you."

"Let me explain."

"Excuse me; this is scarcely the place for the explanation."

"It will be a short one."

"Then I will hear it."

"Even from the days when I was 'tipped' at Eton, it has been my practice to spend a tithe of my windfalls in charity. This way of mine originated in a superstitious notion (pardonable in a schoolboy) that windfalls came oftenest to those who gave a tenth of them to people in urgent need of the whole. Even to this day the practice is not free from superstition, now that the old habit is maintained from a vague, fanciful feeling that it would be unlucky to relinquish it."

"You told me your explanation would be a short one," suggested Phyllis, with just a little severity in her clear voice and almost smiling face.

"It has been made to the last word. Pardon me if I have been too long in assuring you that the poor shall have a tithe of the windfall that has come to me through your hands."

"For their sake I am glad to hear it. They need help, whether it comes to them from superstition or a sense of duty."

"It is never well to assume a virtue if one has it not."

"It is always well to be truthful. If you are free-handed from superstition you are right in not professing to be free-handed from charity. On the other hand——"

"On the other hand? Do go on."

"When his motive is charitable, the man wrongs himself and human nature who calls it superstitious."

"You would not have him boast of his benevolence?"

"Nor would I honour him for being ashamed of it. We discredit our kind when we pretend to be worse than we are."

"And that may be done by vaunting our evil qualities, or disclaiming our good ones."

"To do the former we must be in some degree shameless, to do the latter we cannot be altogether devoid of cowardice."

"It is graceless in me to repay your kindness by asking you to render me another," returned Arthur Champion, with a simple seriousness that disposed Phyllis favourably towards him, and at the same time quickened her desire to be quit of the man, whose eyes seemed to hold

her where she was, and whose speech constrained her to talk too much, in spite of her resolve to say as little as possible. "If I were known to you I should not venture to do so. But the total stranger who has crossed your path in a morning's walk, and may perhaps never again set eyes upon you, dares to say he would feel happier for many a day, if you would name the particular object to which he should pay his customary tribute from his latest gift of fortune."

"Surely," returned Phyllis, her colour rising suddenly, from feelings that occasioned her a slight sense of embarrassment, "the total stranger who gives freely to the poor cannot need me to guide him to fit objects for his charity. He can, without my assistance, select hospitals requiring help, and poor people wanting relief. Why does he ask my instructions in so simple a matter?"

"Because," returned Mr. Champion, with undiminished composure, but at the same time in a tone of suppressed earnestness that gave his words an almost supplicatory character, "in recalling the curious incident that has enabled him to speak for a few minutes to a lady whom he will not forget, he would like to think that he and she have co-operated for a good end—that at the close of their brief interview she

condescended to tell him of some beneficent work to which he might put his hand,—and that he did her bidding with the alacrity of a man honoured with a commission far greater than his deserts. But if it would give her one instant's uneasiness to comply with this fanciful request, if she thinks that regard for her feelings should have prevented him from making it, he entreats her to pardon a mistake which he will regret deeply."

"My dear sir," ejaculated Phyllis, overcome by this strange man's strange seriousness and quiet fervour. "I am foolish to have made much of a trifle. There is nothing for me to resent in your kind suggestion. Send a gift to the Ryde Hospital, where more money is wanted to complete the new wing. But," she added, with a re-assuring smile, "don't send the whole tithe of your windfall to the chief charity of my town. Reserve some of it for your other claimants."

"Thanks, thanks, Miss Lovelock!" returned Mr. Champion. "I thought you would be kind enough to tell me of some charitable enterprise near your home."

"I thought we were strangers!" cried Phyllis, with a movement of surprise.

"I spoke of myself as a total stranger to you."

"But you knew me from the first?"

"If I had said we were strangers to each other, the facts would almost justify my words. It was never my good fortune to be introduced to you; and I cannot remember to have met you anywhere but in these gardens, and last Sunday in Trinity Church."

"But you have learnt my name?" cried Phyllis, curiosity and surprise occupying her mind so completely, that it was for the moment incapable of disquiet from any other cause.

"That is easily explained. Soon after I had seen your cousin's Academy picture, my sister-in-law, who met you years since in the Isle of Wight, told me the painting was a portrait of the artist's cousin, Miss Phyllis Lovelock. When I saw you last Sunday in Trinity Church, I immediately recognized you as the original of *my* picture."

"*Your* picture?" with an accent of still livelier astonishment and animation.

"*Mine.* The work, which under any circumstances would have pleased me as a mere work of art, delighted me so greatly for other reasons that I bought it almost as soon as I had seen it. I am the owner of 'A Rose without a Thorn.'"

"What a curious, comical adventure!" exclaimed Phyllis, suddenly dismissing the air of

constraint that had naturally pervaded her manner from the beginning of this strange interview. "And you are Mr. Champion, the Member of Parliament for Hartrest?"

"At your service in everything, Miss Lovelock," responded Mr. Champion, scarcely more delighted than astonished by the sudden alteration of the lady's tone and air. Certainly there was reason for both feelings; for in a trice, and from no cause at present manifest to the Member for Hartrest, Phyllis had changed from a gentlewoman, conversing under scarcely congenial circumstances with a total stranger, to a frank, blithe-hearted girl, bent on treating an old friend with almost affectionate cordiality.

"It makes me laugh to think how I have been keeping you at a distance, and debating mentally whether I was not compromising my character for sedateness and discretion by allowing you to talk so long with me, when, if I had only known you, I should have led you off straight to Aunt Tournament, who wishes above all things to make your acquaintance."

"I feel myself highly flattered by your aunt's good opinion. But, my dear Miss Lovelock, I am utterly at a loss how to account for it."

"Why, are you not the guardian of those dear little Antonines at Cannes? We know

all about your goodness to poor Mrs. Antonine ever since her husband's death. Margaret Antonine and Aunt Tournament were girls together at Hartrest, where they were both born, and went to the same school, and lived in the same set. They have not seen one another for years, as Mrs. Antonine can live only at Cannes, and until lately Aunt Tournament has been a prisoner to the Isle of Wight. But they exchange letters three or four times a year, and I need not say *Margaret* Antonine (as aunt always calls her) has told us a great deal to your disadvantage."

"To be sure, to be sure!" said Mr. Champion, reddening and stammering not a little—indeed for thirty seconds looking almost sheepish with happy confusion. "You see, poor Fred Antonine left her and the children under my care. I have just done my duty in a common-place, matter-of-fact way to the children, who are my wards. But it is a part of Mrs. Antonine's generous spirit to magnify my little civilities into stupendous services, and say the most absurd things to my honour. 'Pon my word, Miss Lovelock, her gratitude is so extravagant and undeserved it almost humiliates me. She does not understand me in the least. With all her cleverness, she has not the slightest knowledge of human nature."

"But those who know you, Mr. Champion," rejoined Phyllis slily, "are well aware that your apparently kind deeds are done altogether from superstition and the mere force of habit."

"Do take me to your aunt," entreated the creature of superstitious usage.

"Come away," replied Phyllis, with an English girl's buoyant freedom to an old friend.

On their way towards Mrs. Tournament, who, sitting in her Bath-chair, had been wondering for several minutes what old friend had encountered her niece under the trees, Phyllis remarked to her new acquaintance,

"As you bought my portrait before you saw me, I can't flatter myself you bought it for the sake of the likeness."

"It is no flattery," Mr. Champion answered vehemently, "but the simple fact that I bought the picture solely on account of the likeness."

"How *can* that be ?"

"My dear Miss Lovelock," replied Arthur Champion, in a lower tone, but with greater vehemence, turning the gentle light of his large, tender, violet eyes into her artless and unflinching gaze, "I will take an early opportunity of letting you know how it was. At present I can only tell you that I knew you—even as you are in all your guileless grace and

dignity—before ever you could read a fairy story."

To these extravagant words, which recurred to her mind several times within the next forty-eight hours, Phyllis Lovelock had no opportunity of replying before it devolved upon her to introduce to her aunt the gentleman who had come to her knowledge in so curious a manner.

"Here is a surprise and pleasure for you, aunt!" she cried, with girlish cordiality and graciousness. "Mr. Champion has come to tell you the latest news of the Antonines. I came upon him in the narrow avenue, and talked with him for a quarter of an hour before I discovered who he was."

After talking for awhile of Margaret Antonine and her children, the new acquaintance spoke with similar freedom of old friends about Hartrest belonging to one or another of the half-a-score families of the placid little borough with whom Mrs. Tournament had lived on terms of intimacy before her marriage; the result of the gossip being that before the invalid was wheeled homewards, nearly a full hour after her usual time for retreating from the gardens, Arthur Champion had been invited to take tea with the ladies in Inverness Terrace on the evening of the next day.

Nor is it unworthy of record that, when Phyllis rose from her camp stool by the side of her aunt's carriage, and Mr. Heron was summoned to finish his morning's work, Mrs. Tournament's grand retriever signified in a remarkable manner his approval of the civilities lavished by his mistresses on their new acquaintance. Rising on his hind legs the dog planted his right fore-paw straight against the left shoulder, and his left fore-paw upon the right shoulder of the member for Hartrest; and having thus placed himself in a convenient attitude for his physiognomical observations, Mr. Max looked Arthur Champion steadily in the face, and scrutinized his features deliberately, pausing several times in the course of the examination, to nod his clever head at the ladies. Having finished his study of the stranger's countenance, Mr. Max wheeled about with an abruptness and extravagance of energy that nearly threw him on his back, and, on recovering command over his four legs, spent the next three minutes in racing round and round the trio, barking with uncontrollable gladness.

"Our dog likes you," said Mrs. Tournament to Arthur Champion, who had joined in Phyllis's laughter at Mr. Max's proceedings.

"Clearly he does! I hope he is a good judge of character," replied Mr. Champion.

"He is always sagacious and just in his preferences. But I cannot say so much for his antipathies. He is never at fault in liking people," said Phyllis, "but he is superlatively capricious and wrong-headed in his aversions. He spends all the days sulking and growling when my cousin Cyril is with us."

"His repugnance to Cyril is unquestionable, but we have yet to learn that he has no good reason for it," Maud Tournament rejoined, in a tone which, notwithstanding its gentleness and perfect freedom from severity, indicated that in his unaccountable dislike of the nephew, Mr. Max was not altogether without the aunt's sympathy and concurrence.

CHAPTER XXII.

ASKING PERMISSION.

HAVING engaged to take tea with them in the evening, Mr. Champion meant only to look at the ladies for a few minutes from a distance, without attracting their attention as he passed through Kensington Gardens on the morning after the incidents recounted in the last chapter. But on seeing Mrs. Tournament in the Broad Walk unattended by Phyllis, he was curious about the cause of the younger lady's absence.

Was it possible that illness kept her in Inverness Terrace? And as this thought gave him one of those absurd alarms to which lovers are alone liable, he was espied by Max, who forthwith bounded to him, leaping and barking with canine impulsiveness.

"I had not intended to come so near your carriage, on my way through the parks, but Mr. Max determined otherwise," said the gentleman apologetically. "Don't close the novel, for I shan't stay a minute."

"Max knew I should prefer a chat with you to the mild excitement of a rather poor story. I had made up my mind to shut the book, and play with my thoughts in the sunshine, when he informed me of your arrival."

"Miss Lovelock is not with you? I hope she is well."

"She has gone to Twickenham in the best of spirits to spend the morning with Evelina Brook, one of her few friends in the neigbourhood of London. This morning Max is my sole guardian. Is not this sun delicious? The glorious spring makes me a girl again."

"You bear your afflictions bravely."

"Afflictions! There is no need to use the plural number. I have every blessing except good health."

"And your ill health does not depress you?"

"If I could recover my strength and escape my headaches by moaning and looking sour, I would be a caricature of the despondent, cross-grained valetudinarian."

"Your cheerfulness is marvellous and beyond praise."

"You would be wrong to praise me for my good fortune. When people applaud me for what they call my 'pluck,' and speak of my buoyancy as though it were a virtue, I answer, 'Thank you for your admiration, my dear friends; but I should prefer your envy.'"

"You are enviable. Loss of health is the only calamity that would break my spirits."

"Sit down, Mr. Champion. Phyllis's camp-stool is lying in the hood of my chair." The member for Hartrest having accepted the invitation by taking the camp-stool from its place of concealment, and seating himself upon it, the lady continued, "Should you ever lose your health for a considerable period, you will on accommodating yourself to the new state of things be surprised at finding how comfortably you can get along without what you now rate as your greatest blessing."

"I would rather not prove your words by experiment."

"The burdens of life, my dear Mr. Champion, are much heavier to look at than to bear," re-

turned this fragile, blithe-hearted martyr, wincing and whitening even as she spoke under the keen, penetrating knives of tic-douloureux, which constrained her to hold her tongue for sixty seconds.

"There, that twinge is over. If it had been an air of music instead of a nervous uneasiness, it could not have 'gone away' more irrecoverably to the past," continued the sufferer. "Look about you, and see how life offers you illustrations of a truth to which too little attention is paid. The calamities of existence are dismal in anticipation, but rather diverting in experience. The dread of stupendous disaster will almost kill the men who rather like the big trouble when it has become a fact instead of a fear. Misfortune is far less grievous than the apprehension of it."

"To be ill is less afflicting than the sense of sickening for an illness?"

"Though it may not be altogether agreeable, the condition of the chronic invalid at my time of life has its advantages. We invalids are denied several enjoyments; but we have our compensations. It is something in the evening of life to have unlimited license in the way of caprice, indolence, and selfishness. Whilst humanity impels people to pour attentions upon us, we are not required to re-

pay their civilities. We are under no obligation to return their calls, or even to receive them unless we are in the humour for their company. If we are shut out from the diversions of society, we have abundant leisure for books—the best of companions. We are the only class of people in whom a doleful egotism is thought interesting. And human nature is so curiously constituted that we have no difficulty in finding people ready and even happy to spend all their energies in cosseting us. If Aunt Maud were not an invalid, Niece Phyllis would not be so self-sacrificing and devoted."

"According to your theory, to lose Niece Phyllis would be less afflicting than the fear of losing her."

"Thank you for an agreeable suggestion."

"What would you do, if some man were selfish enough to wish for your companion?"

"Perhaps I should contrive to disappoint his wish. Phyllis would have married ere now, if I had not persuaded her to decline several fairly good offers, and fenced off an even larger number of bad ones."

"I can't believe you would prefer your own happiness to hers!" ejaculated Mr. Arthur Champion, with a faint note of indignation in his incredulous tone.

"The grand advantage of my position is that

as an invalid I may be as selfish as I please," replied Maud Tournament, her eyes brightening with drollery whilst for the moment her voice was the voice of a petted child rather than a thoughtful woman.

"But you can't please to be more selfish than you are."

"Of course, like all selfish people," returned Maud, "I know how to make myself believe that my most selfish acts are dictated by duty and care for others. I never fence off one of Phyllis's admirers without making her happiness the one important consideration, and commending myself as the most unselfish and super-excellent of aunts."

"You have reason to dread losing her. She must make a fresh conquest every time she goes into society."

"The fear of losing her! Don't talk of such a disaster. The dread of it is worse than any headache."

"Still, according to your own theory, the calamity would be less harrowing than the dread."

"Doubtless. I should bear it as I best might. It would not kill me."

Lowering his voice almost to a whisper, Arthur Champion said, with strong emotion,

"I am glad to hear you say so, Mrs. Tournament. I would not kill you, or do you any un-

kindness. But you must give her to me. If I don't have her I shall die."

To which announcement the invalid responded by a low, light, merry peal of girlish laughter.

"This is preposterous!" she exclaimed, when her tune of merriment played itself out like the air of a musical box. "Why, you have only seen her three times in your whole life. You saw her for the first time only last Sunday. It is only yesterday that you spoke to her for the first time. And now you have the audacity to say you love her. My dear Mr. Champion, she would distrust a passion of so quick a growth."

"It is an older passion than you imagine. More than twenty-five years have passed over my head since I loved her."

"What can you mean? She is not twenty-five yet. Did you worship her five years before she was born?"

"Even so."

"This is madness! And yet Margaret Antonine never told me you had suffered from sunstroke."

"Have I frightened you so much that you would have me go away?"

"No,—you don't look dangerous. That's right, Max; come between me and that strange man, who would like to marry my Phyllis in

this world because he loved her in a previous state of existence."

But, instead of showing any purpose of taking Maud's side, Mr. Max made it clear that he meant to be a strictly impartial moderator; for, after putting one of his fore-feet on Arthur's knee and the other on the skirt of his mistress's dress, he regarded them both with equal good-will.

"I rather think Max will say a word in my behalf," said the member for Hartrest. "See, he is licking my hand. Now, Max, talk away."

"You had better speak for yourself."

In reply to which invitation, Arthur Champion, in something less than twenty minutes, delivered himself of an aptly and strenuously worded statement, that gave Mrs. Tournament a sufficiently comprehensive and minute view of his course from his earliest years; particular prominence being given to the circumstances that caused him to buy the Academy picture.

"You must be older than you look," said Mrs. Tournament, when the personal memoir had been spoken to the last word.

"Mrs. Tournament," implored the gentleman in answer to an inquiry that the circumstances fully warranted, "don't laugh at me, when I tell you that I am just about twice Miss Lovelock's age."

"I wish you were twenty years younger."

"I am painfully aware my age is against me."

"I wish it were. If you were an arrogant young man with an overweening sense of your merits, I should not be afraid of you. But, unfortunately, you are precisely at the time of life when a man of your figure and fashion and worldly experience is most acceptable to women of the noblest kind. You are old enough to be modest, and still young enough to be enthusiastic. If I don't take care I shall lose my niece."

"You won't refuse to help me?"

"I don't promise to do so."

"You won't use your influence against me?"

"I would use it against you, if I could. But you have gone to work so cleverly as almost to deprive me of my freedom of action. You come to me, only an aunt, and very much an invalid, as though I had a mother's authority over Phyllis, and were strong enough to help myself. It pleases the aunt to be treated so deferentially. It humours the invalid, who is a mere pensioner on the world's pity, to be approached by a suitor for aid. And then I know you to be loyal and true! The man, who deserves all that Margaret Antonine says about him, could not fail to be a good husband!"

"But I don't deserve all her preposterous

eulogies," cried Mr. Champion, with an honesty that raised him yet higher in Maud Tournament's good opinion. "Regard all her testimony about me as the mere extravagance of a generous woman's gratitude."

"Even so, I shall have good reason to think well of you."

"Then you will take me for your son?"

Whereupon Maud Tournament indulged in another rippling peal of laughter before she cried gaily,

"How can that be? Phyllis is only my niece."

"But she has been a daughter to you."

"Indeed, indeed she has been!"

Having thought the matter over for three minutes, whilst Mr. Champion held his tongue, Mrs. Tournament, looking archly at her companion, said,

"And now I think you had better go about your business. Go away to Whitehall Place."

"You would have time for consideration?"

"I won't commit myself on the impulse of the moment. That is reasonable?"

"Quite so."

"Though I decide deliberately, I won't decide selfishly."

"I don't think you ever were selfish in any matter touching her."

"Anyhow, I won't be selfish this time. I have no temptation to be so. For though I have held her to me more than once, when she seemed likely to slip through my hands, I am not so odiously selfish as to keep her unmarried for my own sake, now that she ought to be married. Time is going on with her."

"It is going on with all of us."

"And fast, very fast, with me," said the charming woman, with the solemnity and drollery that were alike natural to her. "Though I am much better than I used to be in my head and my feet, my doctors have lately discovered something wrong here" (putting her right hand lightly to her heart), "a new mischief that Phyllis knows nothing about. She mayn't know it. If she knew of it, nothing would induce her to leave me. And sometimes I think I should like to see her with a baby in her arms, before I say my last prayer and have my last laugh. But go away."

"I may come all the same in the evening, as we arranged."

"Yes; but you must come early and go early, come before eight and go by half-past nine. Phyllis will not have heard anything of what has passed between us."

"But *you* will have made up your mind?"

"Possibly. What if I have?"

"Could you not give me a sign?"

"What an importunate suitor you are!" returned Maud Tournament; adding, with a smile, "If I tell her to put a great deal of sugar in your tea, you may infer that I like you. Now do be off. If you stay here any longer, I'll set Max upon you."

A threat that of course made the Indian Intelligence Secretary do as he was bid.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE DAY AFTER THE FAIR.

THE tea in Inverness Terrace was a success. No faint, lukewarm slop, brought in cups from the kitchen, the cheering beverage was brewed in old-fashioned style on a tea-board by Phyllis, who had returned from Twickenham with her beauty at its brightest; and it was all the more grateful to Mr. Champion on account of Maud Tournament's care for the making of his particular cup.

"Put plenty of sugar in Mr. Champion's cup. He likes his tea sweet," said the invalid from the sofa on which she was resting.

"How should you know that, aunt?" inquired Phyllis, whose surprise at the order would have been less lively had she known how much her

aunt and their guest had seen of each other in the forenoon.

"If you can't trust my instinct," replied the aunt, "ask Mr. Champion if he would like his tea without sugar."

"Any number of lumps, if you please, Miss Lovelock," cried the member for Hartrest, who by the way had a strong dislike of sugar in tea.

The cups and saucers having disappeared, the chat ran brightly (and none the less so for the total absence of epigrammatic lightning) on such trifles as are the chief material of familiar discourse, till the early time at which the visitor took his leave, in mindfulness of Mrs. Tournament's request.

On his departure the two women had a strictly confidential conference that brought at least one look of liveliest astonishment to Phyllis's face, and caused the friends not a few tears and thrillings of emotion, of which it would be hard to say whether they were less painful than pleasurable. But though her excitement at Maud Tournament's revelations was no unqualified pleasure it may be inferred from certain admissions which escaped her lips at the close of talk, that Phyllis had no disposition to resent her suitor's precipitancy.

"It does not seem as though we had known him for so short a time," she remarked, when

she had placed half a dozen kisses on Maud's eyelids.

"We have known him a long time. Margaret Antonine's friend is no stranger to us."

"True; his good deeds have made him familiar to us. Had he been our visitor for years we should not know more of his nature."

"And he knew you almost before you were born," said Aunt Tournament, with a mischievous accent and arch look.

"Don't make fun of me, Maud. I don't like blushing, and there's no reason why I should blush for myself because he is so absurd!" cried Miss Phyllis, reddening like a peony, as she protested against her aunt's gentle raillery.

"I am afraid, my pet," returned Aunt Tournament pitifully, "you won't sleep well to-night."

"Sleep? As soon as you are in the bed, to which you must go at once, I shall begin to cry, and shall go on crying till the morning. You must not be surprised to see me looking ill to-morrow."

"Even when you are crying you won't be altogether wretched."

"I shall be utterly miserable," responded Phyllis, with enough vehemence to show she was more than half inclined to break down at once.

"Phyllis darling, you don't blame me?" asked the invalid, with affectionate concern.

"How could I blame you for anything? Of course you only had my happiness in view."

"I see you feel I have done wrong. And if you do think so, I must have been very wrong!" cried Aunt Tournament, with a show of alarm and penitency that caused Phyllis to give the culprit a reassuring smile and speech.

"You did quite right to be kind to him," said Miss Lovelock, "and I am not at all sorry you told me to put such a lot of sugar in his tea. And, though I shall cry myself to sleep, I won't show him a pair of red eyes, when he joins us to-morrow morning in the Broad Walk."

Things having been put in this auspicious train, they went smoothly and quickly during the next three weeks in Inverness Terrace and Kensington Gardens. Had she imagined how her plot at the artist's studio was threatened with failure by the counter-plot in Mrs. Cheeseman's boarding-house, Miss Rapier would scarcely have met her brother-in-law every morning at the breakfast-table, or greeted him every afternoon on his return from town, with the cheerfulness that distinguished her countenance and manner, whilst the two schemes for Phyllis Lovelock's matrimonial settlement occupied the

minds of the two sets of schemers. Nor would Cyril Twyford have proceeded so leisurely in the business, which concerned Miss Rapier no less than himself, had he known of the intimacy that sprang up so quickly between Mr. Champion and the ladies in Inverness Terrace.

On running from London to Ryde, three or four days after his aunt's return to Evensong, Mr. Cyril Twyford had no doubt that he should accomplish the main purpose of the journey. Whether Phyllis would consent to marry him in the autumn was a question on which he had some misgiving. He was prepared for her refusal to wed so long as Aunt Tournament needed her services. It seemed possible to him that Phyllis might not grant his prayer without standing on her dignity and insisting on conditions. She might reflect on his slowness to carry out their fathers' arrangement for her happiness, and from pique or for her majesty's sake might argue that, having waited so long for his own convenience, to take advantage of the compact, he could wait a little longer for her pleasure. Of course, she would require of him divers promises of immediate amendment and greater industry. It would be needful for him to persuade her that he was weary of idleness, penitent of former levities, and seriously bent on emulating his father's goodness. But though

he could not expect her to surrender at discretion, he had no doubt she would capitulate on terms, which he could and would honourably observe till he should be strongly tempted to break them.

With this cheerful view of his case he crossed from Portsmouth Harbour to the Wight Pier, chuckling at the ease with which he would earn a thousand pounds of Miss Rapier by making Phyllis an offer of marriage some twelve months earlier than he had intended to make it. At the same time he felicitated himself even more emphatically on the ten thousand pounds that would come to him from Miss Rapier's fantastic jealousy and panic, if he could induce Phyllis to marry him before the end of the year. And certainly he had cause for elation at his prospect of acquiring so agreeably a sum of money exceeding two thirds of his squandered patrimony.

His pleasant anticipations of escape from degrading involvements were, however, rudely shattered by disclosures that followed his reappearance in the villa, where he was neither an expected nor a welcome guest.

For Mr. Cyril Twyford had spent barely twenty minutes in his aunt's drawing-room, when the door was thrown open to admit a caller, whom at a glance he recognized to his

astonishment and dismay as the original of the miniature which Miss Rapier had shown him only a few days since.

The resemblance of the intruder to the portrait was too perfect for the artist to have had the slightest doubt on the matter, even if Mrs. Tournament's maid-servant in ushering the visitor to the presence of her mistress had failed to pronounce his name distinctly. Moreover at the moment of Mr. Champion's entrance, Cyril Twyford detected in Maud Tournament's face a transient look of perplexity and annoyance which, though it would have escaped the notice of a less keen and jealous observer, satisfied the artist that his aunt was for the moment more surprised than delighted by the unexpected appearance of the member for Hartrest. Turning his glance quickly from his aunt to his cousin, Cyril saw also in Phyllis Lovelock's countenance a warm glow, which an hour later he was pleased to call the blush of detected perfidy, though in fact it was neither brighter nor deeper than the colour that usually rises to a delicate and nervous face at the moment of sudden joy.

"My dear Mrs. Tournament," said Arthur Champion, in the tone of a familiar and welcome visitor. "I have just driven round to tell you I must catch the next boat for Portsmouth,

and sleep to-night in Somersetshire. On my return to the Pier Hotel half-an-hour since, I found a telegram, announcing the death of a near relative, and this intelligence compels me to hasten to Queenscote, where my poor cousin breathed his last."

"You have *our* sincere condolence," began Mrs. Tournament, speaking for herself and Phyllis. But, before she could prove herself capable of imparting the charms of ease and naturalness to words of conventional sympathy, Mr. Champion stayed her by saying, with a coldness distinct from heartlessness,

"It is no case for strong compassion or deep feeling of any kind. As I had only the slightest acquaintance with my cousin Reginald, my grief for him is only a few degrees removed from the mild regret I should feel at the death of a kinsman I had never seen. As he was a good man, and had for years suffered from a very painful malady that could only end as it just has ended, I might almost speak of his death as an event for thankfulness. Indeed, I should do so, were not his death largely beneficial to me."

"If you would go by the next boat," returned Mrs. Tournament, adapting her voice to his matter-of-fact tone, "you really have no time to lose."

"I must be off in three minutes. The captain

has promised to keep the boat for me, but I would rather not try his courtesy in that way."

"But, before you go, let me introduce you to my nephew, Mr. Cyril Twyford, the painter of a picture you know about."

"I am delighted to make my patron's acquaintance, though it is an unexpected pleasure to make it here," said Mr. Cyril Twyford easily, showing by a light stress on the one disagreeable word of the speech that he used it only in playful reference to the obsolete relation of picture-buyers to picture-painters.

"Never," returned Arthur Champion cordially, "was a painter more heavily indebted to a patron than I am to you, Mr. Twyford. I have to thank you for a work of art that will be a perpetual source of enjoyment to me. I have also to thank you and your work for my admission to the house where I have the pleasure of taking your hand for the first time. If it had not been for your picture, I should never have discovered *my* 'Rose without a Thorn.'"

"Confound him!" thought Cyril, beginning to scowl. "What the deuce does the fellow mean by that *my?*"

"But I must run away, my dear Mr. Twyford. I go, however, with the hope that we may meet again soon, and live to be friends."

"The impudent, presuming, 'bumptious' fel-

low!" thought Cyril, scowling mentally, with warmer anger, though he had by this time enough prudence and good manners to mask his handsome face with a smile. "He is presuming to patronize me. If he would be my friend, he must buy my friendship with a good price."

Cyril's dissatisfaction with the aspect of affairs was not lessened when Phyllis followed Mr. Champion out of the room, with the obvious purpose of saying a few words to him in the hall, or, worse still, in the garden.

"They are intimate, it appears?" said the artist to his aunt, Phyllis having closed the door behind her.

"It appears so, Cyril."

"How the deuce did they become so intimate?"

"By knowing one another."

"Where?"

"Wherever they have happened to meet."

"But where have they met?"

"In London. In a certain sense, Mr. Champion is no new friend. We have known *of* him for years. But we have only lately made his personal acquaintance. We saw a good deal of him at Inverness Terrace."

"There, of all places in the world!"

"If you had *paid* us more attention, and called oftener in Inverness Terrace," returned Maud

Tournament, in a way that declared her, invalid though she was, still possessed of energy and nerve to deal out meet reproof to an unmannerly nephew, "you also would probably have made Mr. Champion's acquaintance there."

"My dear aunt," returned Cyril apologetically, "I called two or three times. But you made no suggestion that you would like to see much of me."

"That's true, Cyril; and, truth to tell, I was too fully occupied to want your society. Mr. Champion was coming to see us every day."

"It is not possible, aunt, that you are bent on making up an engagement between him and Phyllis?"

"I am bent on no such thing."

"Phyllis treats him in so flattering a manner I might be pardoned for supposing there was something going on that——"

"There *is* something between them, Cyril!" responded the pluckiest of greatly suffering invalids, seizing this earliest opportunity to enlighten Cyril on a matter of high moment, because she thought that her promptitude would save Phyllis from a painful and even distressing interview with her cousin. "Mr. Champion has made Phyllis an offer, and she has accepted him. I am not bent on making up an engagement between them, for the simple reason that the engagement was made up yesterday."

"Aunt Tournament," returned Cyril, in a low hoarse voice, his face whitening with emotion, "you are playing with me? You are as good as you are clever, as true as you are brave, but in sport you sometimes play tricks with words."

"I have told you the simple truth, Cyril. Phyllis has promised to be Arthur Champion's wife. You seem surprised. Why *should* you be surprised? Phyllis was *never* engaged to you."

"But, Aunt Tournament, you know I always meant to marry her. You know what was her father's and my father's wish."

"On his death-bed, Cyril," said Maud Tournament, lowering her voice, "*your* father begged me to save Phyllis from marrying you, unless you altered and became a good man. You have *not* altered, you are *not* a good man; and I have kept my word to your father. If you are angry with anyone for this engagement, let all your anger fall on me.—Hush! Phyllis is in the hall again."

CHAPTER XXIV.

NEWS FOR PHYLLIS.

"MR. CHAMPION had not spoken to us of this cousin Reginald. Did he say anything more

about him?" inquired Aunt Tournament of Phyllis, as soon as the latter returned to the drawing-room.

"Only that he has succeeded by his cousin's death to a considerable estate in Somersetshire. That was about all. He had nothing to say of importance," Phyllis replied, with characteristic unconcern at her future husband's enrichment.

"Did you treat the matter as unimportant to him?" asked Cyril, mentally accusing his cousin of absurd affectation and miserable hypocrisy, in speaking thus lightly of an incident that of course occasioned her secret exultation.

"I told him it was a pity the estate came to him, rich enough without it," returned Phyllis, with the same exasperating simplicity.

"And how did he relish your way of regarding his good fortune?" inquired Cousin Cyril.

"He agreed with me that the property would not add to our happiness. But he added that wealth was power for good, and therefore desirable."

"Canting prig!" muttered Cyril, between his teeth. "For all his good looks, the man is a Methodist, who will go in for field-preaching, whilst he ruins his tenants by rack-renting them."

"This takes me by surprise," Mrs. Tournament remarked to her nephew, whose mutterings had, of course, been inaudible to the women. "He

never told us he was next in succession to this property. It was like him to be silent on the subject when he was paying his addresses to Phyllis!"

"Does Cyril know?" asked Phyllis, colouring from her throat to the tops of her ears.

Put to Maud Tournament, the question was answered by Cyril, who said,

"Yes, I know. Aunt told me just now of the honour you have done me in giving yourself to a rich baronet."

"A baronet, Cyril? What do you mean?" asked Mrs. Tournament, opening her eyes with astonishment.

"That your friend, my cousin that is to be, is Sir Arthur Champion, of Queenscote, Somerset, baronet."

"My dear Phyllis, is this so? Surely, Cyril, you must be mistaken?"

"I daresay he is right, aunt," Phyllis replied quietly. "Arthur said something about the estate going with the title; but I paid so little attention to the remark that I had forgotten it."

"Of course, my dear Phyllis, to your loftiness titles are even more insignificant than riches. But you must allow me the pleasure of gladdening our aunt's proud heart by assuring her I have given your accepted suitor his proper description. Since he bought my Academy picture, I have

made particular inquiries about the gentleman. A few months hence, my dear Phyllis, you will be Lady Champion of Queenscote."

"I had not thought of that," said Phyllis, shuddering at the thought of the magnificence coming upon her. "I would rather be called Mrs. Champion. This is not what I looked for when I promised to be his. He paid me a just compliment in holding his tongue of this title and property. He knew *they* would not recommend him to my love. Still I should have said 'yes' all the same, if he had told me about them."

"I daresay you would," Cyril remarked sneeringly, waxing so hot against his cousin's ludicrous insincerity that he would have frankly called her "a humbug" had Aunt Tournament been out of the way. But, scamp and *roué* though he was, Ambrose Twyford's son was still too much a gentleman to shock the ears of a sick and aged lady with coarse speech.

"And my answer would have been the same if he had been a duke," said the exasperating Phyllis, "though I should soon die of dignity, if fate insisted on making me a duchess."

"But, with all your indifference to rank and wealth, you have waited on fortune to good purpose, and made a fine catch," Mr. Cyril remarked bitterly. "You have done better than taking a poor, struggling artist, or a needy par-

son, for better and for worse. When you are Lady Champion of Queenscote, you must commission me to paint your portrait again, and ask me once or twice in the season to dinner."

"That speech is not a nice speech, Cyril, and I wish you had not made it," said Phyllis, with a happy combination of dignity and tenderness. "You never before spoke to me in this strange way. Why all this distasteful talk about rank, and wealth, and grandeur? It cannot be that Arthur's accidental advantages (*if* they are advantages) have set you against my engagement. But I am not the least angry with you, Cyril, though you should have kissed me, and wished me happy ere this. This is our first quarrel, Cyl. Let us make it up."

"There is no quarrel, child. There, I kiss you not once but twice, and wish you all the happiness you deserve," returned Cyril relentingly, suiting his action to his words. "And now I must kiss Aunt Tournament, and bid you good-bye, for I am off to London."

"Off to London!" cried Phyllis. "Why, you told us you had come to stay two or three days."

"But I have changed my mind. There, good-bye," replied the artist, flinging himself out of the room, and running upstairs for the little portmanteau that was all the luggage he had brought with him.

Three minutes later, Phyllis saw him, walking quickly, with his portmanteau in his hand, across the lawn to the wicket-gate at the bottom of the garden.

"What is the meaning of this? Why has he behaved so strangely?" asked Phyllis, turning to her friend. "If you don't tell me, aunt, I shall go away and mope in my room."

"Then you had better have the explanation of the poor fellow's gustiness, though it won't put you in the best of spirits. His dear father and your dear father (ah! what fine, good men they were!)," said Maud Tournament, stroking her niece's hair, "had a pleasant, foolish fancy that their children should marry. It soothed your dear father on his death-bed, when you were a little child, to think you would be Cyril's wife. In his last hours, however, your uncle, Ambrose Twyford, regarded the project with repugnance and dread, for he felt his son (already an idle young man) would never be worthy of a true woman's devotion; and on the very day of his death he enjoined me solemnly to save you from the match, unless Cyril changed altogether for the better. Till this moment you have never heard of this project, but it was imparted to Cyril from a notion that it would be a wholesome influence to him. The consequence was that in his early manhood he had a kind of

attachment to you that was something stronger and more sentimental than mere cousinly affection. For a time he may have fancied himself in love with you, but he never was really in love with you. If he had been in love with you, he would have asked you to marry him seven or eight years since. Instead of taking the course marked out for him by his father and your father, he became a gay, imprudent young man —no worse than other idlers of his kind, but *still* an idler. He has not been a strenuous worker in his profession, but only a worker by fits and starts. He has lost most of the money his father left him, and thrown away other advantages formerly pertaining to him as his father's son. He is a disappointed man, paying a heavy penalty for his imprudence and follies. It is not wonderful that such a man should reflect bitterly on his errors, and feel sharp remorse when circumstances put in close contrast before his mind what he is and what he might have been. To-night the contrast has stung him into something very like rudeness and unkindness. The news of your engagement reminded him painfully how you might have been engaged to him—ay, married to him—had he been a few degrees less unworthy of you. Poor fellow, we must make allowances for him, for his dear father's sake."

"Make allowances for him?" cried Phyllis,

warmly. "It is not for us to *judge* him! You may be tender to him for his father's sake, but I must be very thoughtful and kind to him for *his own sake.*"

"Oh! Phyllis, Phyllis, child of your old childless aunt, how heedful you are for all who need kindness!" responded Maud Tournament, tears rolling over her smiling cheeks. "The good Father above us would have made all women like you, if He could have done it without putting the angels to the blush."

CHAPTER XXV.

A VICTIM OF PERFIDY.

RUNNING on board the *Horatio Nelson* steamer at the very moment of its departure from the Wight Pier, Cyril Twyford reached Portsmouth in time for the train that met the London express at Bishopstoke. The journey from Ryde to London took only four hours; but they were long enough for Mr. Twyford to have realized the magnitude of his misadventure, and to have worked himself into a fury of virtuous indignation at Phyllis's hypocrisy, and worldliness, and perfidy, before his train slid into the Waterloo Bridge terminus.

It would have been strange had he returned to London in the same happy spirits

that made the morning's run so enjoyable. The property, to which his moral right was unquestionable, had slipped from his hands at the very moment when he had determined to assert his dormant title. Instead of respecting his vested interest in her heart and hand, Phyllis (without his permission obtained or even sought aforehand) had presumed to give both of them to a man whom she had not known for an entire month; and, in the present defective state of the law touching the powers and privileges of womankind, Mr. Cyril Twyford (whilom a student of the Inner Temple) was aware that, instead of exceeding the limits of her legal right, she could fulfil her preposterous engagement, to the complete and perpetual extinction of his prior claim to her warmest affections and twelve thousand pounds.

Foreign to his nature to think how little he deserved her, it was yet farther from his selfish and arrogant temper to consider the monstrous injustice of his design to impose his injured health, and broken fortunes, and vitiated tastes on the love of a woman so virtuous, and beautiful, and rich in enviable circumstances, that in marrying a man of Arthur Champion's rank and wealth and social distinctions, she would only mate with her equal! During the first two hours of the return journey he thought only of the

enormous injury done him by her outrageous determination.

From his earliest manhood he had designed to convert this cousin into his wife at some convenient season, provided it should not in the meantime be his manifest interest to marry some one else; and now that the woman towards whom he had nursed this generous purpose was matrimonially lost to him beyond all common chances of recovery, he discovered suddenly that he had for years loved her with strong, fervent, chivalric devotion. It was clear to him that he had married no one else simply for the sake of wedding her; that he had neglected countless opportunities of capturing heiresses, because he could not endure the thought of grieving her; that, in fact, he had wasted his whole life on her, only that she should reward his faithful, patient service by pitching him over contemptuously as soon as she saw her way to win a husband with a title and a big estate.

It deepened and exasperated the anguish which came to him from the purely sentimental side of his misadventure to remember that, together with the treacherous and unutterably cruel Phyllis, he had lost her fortune and also the large sum of money that Miss Rapier had promised to give him in case he married his cousin quickly. Phyllis's money, to which he

had so long looked as a fund for his social rehabilitation, was gone from him irrecoverably. Miss Rapier would keep her ten thousand pounds. He had even lost the thousand pounds which he would have received immediately from Erica, had he induced Phyllis to make him a promise of marriage; and this last disappointment was felt all the more keenly, because he had already formed a congenial scheme for using the thousand pounds no less profitably than agreeably at Homburg and Baden-Baden in the ensuing August and September.

In ignoble natures the stings of mortification are followed quickly by the impulses of revenge. Having realized the magnitude of his misadventure, and considered several of its inevitable and most galling consequences, Cyril Twyford asked himself how he could wreak his resentment on the cause of his calamity.

It sharpened his fury against Phyllis that he imagined her smiling at his humiliation, and credited her with a design of making it more complete. Remembering how a mere accident had given Mrs. Tournament an opportunity of announcing the engagement so promptly in her niece's absence, and how Phyllis had flushed with surprise (doubtless also with annoyance) at his premature knowledge of the affair, he charged Phyllis with intending to withhold the informa-

tion from him as long as possible, in the hope that at the last moment she should have the pleasure of extorting from him a direct offer of marriage, and the malicious delight of giving it a flat refusal. To account for such cruelty in a woman by no means famous for malevolence, Mr. Twyford assumed that she had been piqued by his delay to make her a formal declaration. It was his conviction that, whilst she had thrown him over and accepted Arthur Champion from mere heartless ambition, the spite of wounded vanity had made her wish to humiliate her jilted lover with a point-blank rejection.

Whilst taking the worst possible view of Phyllis's behaviour, Mr. Twyford found no difficulty in giving his revengeful wrath a specious colouring of justice. He did not say to himself, "She has disappointed me, and I will be revenged upon her." Taking higher ground, and looking down upon her from a moral elevation, he said, "She is a bad, false, heartless flirt, and I'll punish her. Such falseness and cruelty shall not go unpunished."

Having determined to punish Phyllis for her wickedness in accepting the man whom she loved, instead of waiting for an opportunity of accepting the man who had never inspired her with a sentiment warmer than strong cousinly affection, Cyril Twyford went on to think how he could

effect his penal purpose; and in doing so he thought of Miss Rapier of Regent's Park, whose dread of losing her brother-in-law's companionship justified the artist in supposing she would feel no cordial friendliness to Sir Arthur Champion's second wife. Hitherto Mr. Cyril Twyford had regarded Miss Rapier as an eccentric lady, whose intercourse with him would end as soon as he should afford her the sense of security for which she was prepared to pay so handsomely.

The new aspect of affairs gave the artist another view of his relation to the lady, and prepared him for events that would bring them yet closer together, and make them co-operate for a much longer period. By Phyllis's marriage, he and Miss Rapier would become members of the same circle, if not exactly of the same family. At Lady Champion's house he would doubtless encounter Sir Arthur Champion's sister-in-law from time to time, and, whilst he would have no disposition to promote the happiness of the cousin who had done him grievous wrong, Miss Rapier would naturally desire to lessen Lady Champion's influence over her husband. Jealous women are seldom scrupulous in taking measures to gratify their jealousy; and in this respect Miss Rapier had already shown her resemblance to the majority of such women. It was unlikely the lady would

acquiesce in the marriage. On the contrary, it was much more probable that after the marriage she would be willing to spend a larger sum and take even bolder measures to sow dissension between her brother-in-law and his wife. Under these circumstances, the artist asked himself, was it not possible that his brief and unsuccessful alliance with Miss Rapier to prevent the marriage might be followed by a longer and more effectual alliance to dissolve it?

As he answered this question in the affirmative, Cyril Twyford saw that, whilst it would afford him the means of inflicting proper chastisement on his perfidious cousin, the second compact might yield him even greater pecuniary advantage than the futile alliance would have afforded him, if it proved successful. By working with Miss Rapier to make Sir Arthur Champion's second marriage a calamitous union, the artist imagined that he might bring her completely under his authority, and even gain a profitable power over her brother-in-law.

CHAPTER XXVI.

FRIENDS IN TROUBLE.

WHILST Mr. Twyford was debating the possibility of playing on Miss Rapier's jealousy so as to use

her for several selfish ends, she, sitting alone in one of the drawing-rooms of Thurlow Lodge, was saying to herself, "He will be bitterly disappointed, and of his own accord will cherish animosity against the innocent cause of his annoyance. So feeling towards Phyllis, he will be easily led to think she has treated him badly. So mean a man is necessarily vindictive; and as soon as he imagines himself the victim of his cousin's perfidy he will long to take vengeance on her. By playing on his vindictiveness, and enabling him to live in comparative idleness, I shall be able to use him as a tool for my own purposes."

When the express train reached London it was 11.30 p.m.; but, late as it was, Cyril Twyford determined to drive to Thurlow Lodge and seek an interview with Miss Rapier before he went to bed. As he had hitherto received no invitation to the house, this resolve was daring and presumptuous. It would be after midnight before he would reach Miss Rapier's door, and it was possible she would decline to receive him for the first time under her roof at so unsuitable an hour. But his brain was too excited to endure the thought of sleeping without first speaking with her. Possibly his quickness in coming to her presence would have her approval. Anyhow his desire to give her the earliest intelligence of a matter so deeply affecting her

peace of mind would account for the untimeliness of his visit. So, hailing the first hansom, he told the driver to take him with the utmost speed to Regent's Park, but ere he threw himself in the cab, he wrote on one of his calling-cards, "Everything has gone against my hopes. Would you like to see me?" and enclosed the card in a common note-envelope that he had in his pocket-book.

Surprise and suspicion were visible in the countenance of the man-servant who, after some delay, opened the front door of Thurlow Lodge in obedience to Mr. Cyril Twyford's vigorous use of knocker and bell-pull.

"Give this letter to Miss Rapier, and ask her if she would like to see me," Cyril Twyford said to the man, who had come from his bed to answer the summons.

"Is it so important, sir, that Miss Rapier must have it to-night?"

"If it were not important, I should not have brought it at this hour."

"I can take the note to Miss Rapier's maid, who will take it to her mistress."

"Do so."

"But as I don't remember you, sir," said the man, with proper caution, "I must ask you to keep outside the door till I have my mistress's order to admit you."

"Quite right. I will remain here."

Five minutes later the door was re-opened, to the great relief of the visitor on the door-step, when Mr. Twyford, on being admitted to the house, was conducted to a drawing-room, where the cautious footman had already lit candles.

"My mistress, sir, will be with you in a few minutes."

In fulfilment of this promise, Miss Rapier entered the room before the caller had barely taken a general survey of its artistic adornments.

"You are very good to trouble yourself to come at this late hour," said the lady, who wore a rich, ruby-coloured dressing-gown.

"I trust you don't think I should have delayed my visit till to-morrow?"

"On the contrary, I thank you for coming so promptly; though I don't suppose you have much news for me."

"You had heard the great fact before you saw my card?"

"The midday post brought me a letter, in which Mr. Champion informed me of the *great fact*, and gave me full particulars of the accidents and means to which he owes his success. I have already written him my hearty congratulations on his good fortune."

"You have heard of Sir Reginald Champion's death?"

"No. Is that true, or only a rumour?"

"He died this morning."

"What is your authority for saying so?"

"Mr. Champion—I beg his pardon, Sir Arthur Champion—himself. He received the announcement of his cousin's death this afternoon by telegram at Ryde, and he started for Somersetshire just an hour before I left the island."

"You saw him at Ryde?"

"At my aunt's house, where I was introduced to him."

"I hope you congratulated him on his success with Phyllis. You surely had a reason to congratulate yourself on an event that will compensate you for the loss of Phyllis, her fortune, and eleven thousand pounds from me, with the honour of being one of Sir Arthur Champion's domestic circle."

"I had no opportunity for giving him my congratulations. He had gone off before I heard of the engagement."

"Sit down and tell me what passed between you and him. Don't stand; take that chair," said Miss Rapier, whose manner to her visitor was abundantly cordial.

Touched by the kindness of her voice, Mr. Twyford was also struck by the composure with

which she alluded to a misadventure that of course occasioned her acute mental trouble.

When she had listened attentively to the artist's account of his brief conversation with Arthur Champion, Miss Rapier asked what had passed between him and Phyllis.

"Then you did not make her an offer?" she remarked, when he had told her all his words with his aunt and cousin.

"Mrs. Tournament's premature disclosure showed the uselessness of proposing."

"And spared you the annoyance of a direct refusal."

"But not the humiliation of being thrown over," Cyril Twyford answered bitterly.

"Of course you feel that!"

"I am not devoid of sensibility."

"It is not wonderful she preferred a rich baronet to a poor artist—a man with a title and good estate to a struggling painter."

"She pretends that she accepted him in ignorance of the title and estate to which he has succeeded so conveniently for her ambition."

"No doubt she says so. And of course you believe her?" said Miss Rapier sarcastically.

"How," returned Mr. Twyford bitterly, "can I doubt the truth of a woman who has been so true to me?"

"Is there a dictionary of the Baronetage

at 'Evensong' amongst your aunt's books?"

"There is one in the drawing-room."

"How strange she never opened it at the page which declares my brother-in-law the heir-presumptive to the baronetcy!"

"When I told her he had come in for a fine estate, she was sorry to hear it."

"How very amusing!"

"On hearing she would be styled *Lady* Champion, she became yet more melancholy—indeed, she almost shed tears."

"She must have a nice sense of humour."

"But," continued Cyril Twyford, with a short scornful laugh, "she was honest enough to say she should have accepted him even if he had been heir to a dukedom."

"On my word," exclaimed Miss Rapier enthusiastically, "she *must* be clever! It will be delightful to have her near me. If she can play in that way, we shall be congenial playmates."

"She says she should die of dignity if she were called 'duchess;' but she thinks she will be able to endure the less oppressive grandeur of a baronet's lady."

"Pretty puss! I could kiss her in spite of the wrong she has done me, the greater injury she means to do me. But don't imagine," the lady added, "because I laugh and talk lightly, that I don't feel this disaster."

"You may well call it a disaster, Miss Rapier," Cyril Twyford exclaimed passionately. "To me it is ruin—complete, absolute, unqualified ruin!"

"To me," responded Erica Rapier, in a deep, hoarse voice, as a dark look of sullen rage came over her face, "it is desolation! There are forms of worldly ruin from which wealth can save us. There is grief for which gold gives no comfort. Robbed of my childeen and of Arthur, I shall be homeless—absolutely homeless—even in this house. I, this husbandless woman, have loved those children as though they were the babes of my own breast, the offspring of my own body; and your cousin Phyllis will tear them from me! Had I been his wife, I could not have loved Arthur Champion more completely, nor could he have cherished me more tenderly; and your Phyllis is drawing him from me with the steady, merciless, irresistible force of her cruel beauty. He will go to her; the children will go to her; and I shall be left alone —a childless, husbandless, homeless old maid. There, go away, go quickly, I dare talk with you no longer."

In compliance with this entreaty, Cyril Twyford rose quickly, and, after bowing to the miserable woman, was already at the door; when recovering her self-command by a violent effort, she stayed his departing steps for another

minute by saying, almost in her usual voice, "But come again to-morrow."

"When would you like to see me?"

"Can you dine with me to-morrow at seven o'clock?"

"I shall have much pleasure in doing so."

"Then come. We will dine by ourselves and have a good talk. Perhaps you could bring my portrait with you."

"It is finished, and looks vastly well in the frame. I will not fail to bring it."

"Thanks! I should like to have it here when my brother-in-law returns from Somersetshire. And before you see me again, write Phyllis one of your prettiest notes, wishing her happiness and all that of kind thing in cousinly fashion. You should not have shown her your annoyance."

"It is not wonderful my feelings routed my discretion."

"On the contrary, it would have been strange had you been the master of your emotions. But there is small merit in keeping one's temper when it is tried only a little."

"She has treated me so infernally ill."

"The more reason that you should show her a cheerful face. When people suffer most, they often have most reason for hiding their pain. You men are so apt to forget this."

"Confound it! Why the deuce should I spare her?"

"You only pleased her when you let her see you writhe. If you would have your revenge in due course, you must lead her to suppose you feel no resentment. I say this in your interest as well as my own."

"I believe it, my dear Miss Rapier; and it does comfort me to have your sympathy."

"You have my strongest sympathy," returned Miss Rapier, with effusive cordiality, rising from her seat and giving the artist her right hand. "I feel heartily for you. We are friends in trouble, and must stand by one another. The game is not over. Indeed, it has only just begun; and even yet we may be winners."

"Whatever comes, I have lost the first prize," growled Phyllis Lovelock's cousin.

"Then," returned Miss. Rapier, smiling on her tool, as she gently withdrew her hand from his grasp, "you must keep a brave heart, and do your best to win the Consolation Cup."

BOOK III.

SUSPICION.

CHAPTER I.

CASES OF CONSCIENCE.

SENSIBLE that his second marriage could not in every particular be agreeable to either of them, Sir Arthur Champion had reason to admire the unselfishness and amiable complacence with which Mrs. Tournament and Miss Rapier concurred in an arrangement that would grievously affect their domestic felicity, by taking from each of them her brightest and dearest household companion.

Declining their proposal that she should give up her Ryde villa and live at Queenscote, where under her niece's roof she could still enjoy a large measure of the society that had been her chief source of happiness for so many years, the invalid persuaded Arthur Champion and Phyllis that she would still find life enjoyable, notwithstanding the pains of incurable sickness, at Evensong, where Evelina Brook—a clever girl, at that moment needing a new home and a womanly mission—had already promised to succeed to the office and duties which her friend Phyllis would

relinquish. In Ryde, amongst her old neighbours and pensioners, she would have the ministrations of a clergyman to whom she was cordially attached, and the mild air that in the winter and spring was in the highest degree needful for her feeble health. At the same time, she would be so near Queenscote and London that she and Phyllis would always be within an easy journey of one another.

"The time has come," said Maud, smiling at her own delicious sauciness, "when your occasional presence, Phyllis, will be more grateful to me than your constant society. At the outset, Evelina won't be so fearfully tyrannical as you have grown of late. Moreover, though an old invalid, I have not completely survived my pride, and, before going to heaven, should like to make you a little less insolent, by showing you that you have been less necessary to me than you imagine."

Whilst Maud Tournament surrendered her darling thus graciously, Miss Rapier was so successful in concealing from Sir Arthur Champion her dislike of his engagement that he could almost think it agreeable to her feelings. Having congratulated him heartily by letter on the startling intelligence which he sent her at the very moment of his cousin's death, she took the earliest opportunity of repeating her felicitations

by word of mouth with a fervour that had every appearance of sincerity.

"Your purpose," she remarked, with an exercise of her natural faculty of fibbing, "is only the fulfilment of an anticipation that has occupied my mind ever since you came to live with me."

"And the anticipation has not distressed you?"

"My only fear was that you would choose a woman of ordinary temper and common-place jealousy, who would regard me with antagonism and make it a point of honour and dignity to separate you from your deceased wife's sister. But Phyllis is sure to treat me well. She will not think it presumptuous and unnatural in a childless old maid to be fond of her sister's children."

"My dear Reeka," exclaimed Arthur Champion, who construed her words as a delicate petition for the custody of one of the children, "Beatrice shall remain with you till she marries, and be your daughter as well as your niece."

But Miss Rapier would not accept or even entertain this considerate proposal, until it should come to her spontaneously from Phyllis. Of course she should like above all things to retain Beatrice; but it would devolve on Lady Champion to make arrangements for her step-daughter's education, and Erica was vehemently urgent that Arthur Champion should say nothing

to Phyllis that would lessen her wifely power or even influence her judgment on so delicate a question.

"She is sure to make the suggestion of her own accord," Arthur avowed confidently.

"Then let it be so made, Arthur," was the reply, "and let her have all the merit and credit of the generous arrangement. If she offers me Beatrice, she will show herself a rarely sympathetic and sweet-natured woman. And, if she refrains from making the offer, I shall not think myself hardly treated. Even if she knew of my desire to keep the child, there are good reasons why she should think it her duty not to gratify it."

"She shall have no hint from me on the matter. But there is no doubt what she will do," returned Sir Arthur Champion, in the same tone of jubilant confidence.

But in her heart, Erica Rapier hoped that this confidence would be disappointed. Because a somewhat eccentric gentlewoman delights in dandling a nurseling little enough to be treated like a doll, it does not follow that she will dote on the infant when it is ceasing to be a mere plaything. And now that Beatrice, already in her thirteenth year, was at the very threshold of "the troublesome age," when children are apt to afford their guardians more anxiety than diver-

sion, Miss Rapier would not have been sorry to be relieved of the girl's custody on terms that would give her a *casus belli* against Lady Champion, and even make her brother-in-law think Phyllis wanting in considerateness and generosity. Moreover, she would just then have welcomed any circumstances that, by affording her a decent pretext for discontent, would encourage her to take an evil course, and palliate to her own conscience the enormous wickedness of an enterprise on which she was already bent.

The event, however, balked Miss Rapier's wish, and justified Arthur Champion's expectation. In accordance with her expressions of enthusiastic delight at his good fortune, Erica Rapier, waiving a point of etiquette, hastened with her brother-in-law to Ryde, to greet Phyllis with affectionate heartiness, and cover her with sisterly assurances; and on the occasion of this flying visit, the two women had not been closeted together for ten minutes when, in reply to Miss Rapier's playful declaration of her readiness to be relieved of her maternal responsibilities, Phyllis, adopting the sisterly mode of address, exclaimed, with equal sweetness and animation,

"How can you, my dear Erica, even in sport impute such gracelessness and cruelty to me as to suggest I would rob you of little Beatrice. I should want common sensibility to regard your

right to her as weaker than a mother's right. She is your child."

"She has been my child, and will remain my niece," returned Erica composedly, "but, on your marriage, she will by law and usage become your daughter."

"Possibly. But human nature should override law and usage when she comes into collision with either of them. Beatrice is your own."

"You forget she is Arthur's daughter."

"I remember that she is your sister's only daughter, and that you have possessed the darling for years."

"Anyhow, Arthur must be consulted on this matter."

"I shall not insult him by speaking to him on the subject, as though it were a question admitting of two answers."

"But if I told you the care of the child was so burdensome an office, that I would fain be relieved of it?" inquired Miss Rapier, with suitable gravity.

"Probably I should burst out laughing. Certainly I should think you very amusing."

"But, my dear girl," cried Miss Rapier, her eyes brightening, and her voice quavering with emotion, little accordant with her light, bantering words, "you are making a serious mistake at the outset of your new career. You are beginning

badly—starting with a magnanimous indiscretion that may have the most embarrassing consequences. On the eve of her marriage, a woman should beware of her future sisters-in-law; for, if she concedes an inch to them on the eve, they'll demand an ell from her on the morrow. You can't conceive what trouble is in store for you, if you show the slightest tenderness to the woman who will never be anything more to you than your husband's sister-in-law. It is in the nature of things that such a vague, ambiguous, almost spurious sister-in-law should be capable of every extravagance of presumption and ingratitude and malice. Keep clear of me, Phyllis, and put me in my proper place at once. You are so good to me that honour constrains me to warn you against myself."

"Let me take you round the garden. If you won't come into the open air with me," said Phyllis, "you'll have me sobbing about your neck. I like you very much; I liked you years since on the Landslip; and if you'll only help me a little, and don't frighten me with wild speech, I will make you love me. Your fashion of putting what you mean into words that you don't mean is never a fashion to my taste; and I can't bear it from clumsy talkers. But you do it so prettily and comically that I almost hope you'll do it again. 'Tis true we shall not be

ordinary sisters-in-law. Those children of Arthur's will bring us two sisterless women closer together than any sisters-in-law—closer even than two own sisters."

Leaving her brother-in-law at Ryde, when she had paid her visit to Mrs. Tournament and Phyllis, Erica Rapier returned to London, at first in the golden sunlight, and later in the deepening shades of a lovely summer evening; and, as she journeyed smoothly and rapidly from Portsmouth to London, she reviewed all the circumstances of her hard case, and asked herself what she must do to recover her one fountain of daily delight, when in the course of a few weeks it would have gone from her completely, for a long, dreary term, do what she might; for ever, if she did nothing!

"My task would be easier if I could detest her!" she said to herself repeatedly, as she again and again acquitted Phyllis of every offence but good fortune. "If she had sought him I could abhor her. If, after meeting him, she had used a single artifice, or exercised one of her womanly charms to draw him to herself, I could hate her. If, when he was pursuing her, I could imagine her to have had the faintest suspicion, even for a single instant, of the misery that would come to me from her consent to his suit, I could detest her. If I could conceive her, since she accepted

him, to have become aware of the monstrous wrong she has done me, I should not have one single relenting thought for her. But in everything she has been as fortunate and blameless as I have been luckless and miserable. In respect to intention, he is not more innocent than she of all my woe. She is as ignorant as he of my dismal mischance."

But these admissions did not dispose the wretched woman to forego a purpose which she could not accomplish without bringing on Phyllis Lovelock shame and anguish that would have been an excessive punishment for the offence, had she wittingly and from malice done Erica Rapier the most grievous and galling and maddening wrong that can be wrought by one woman against another.

"From my infancy, with the single exception of the brief, bright time since Arthur's return from India, my whole existence has been one long conflict with malignant fate. The vile taint of my blood gave me the evil temper that earned me universal hatred when I was a child, and still renders me in my gloomier moments a wild beast rather than a civilized woman. In my girlhood I was everyone's scorn. Was it my fault that the one man I ever loved would even now regard me with abhorrence, and shrink from me as something monstrous, if he suspected my

passion? Am I to blame that, with all my fierce, consuming thirst for love, I am husbandless, childless? And now that I have learnt to be happy in the friendship of the man who may never be aught dearer or nearer to me than a friend, and in the love of those children who are not my own children, and in the home that he and they have made for me, it is not my fault, but the persecution of fate, that he, they, it are slipping from me."

Pursuing the course of thought indicated by these petulant and spasmodic words, Miss Rapier remarked to herself in a subsequent passage of her soliloquy, "To live without his light is to die slowly. It may be so with her also. But why should I die, instead of her? Though I cannot hate her, there is no reason why I should die for her, or endure suffering which I may escape by causing her some such pain as she causes me. I am not bound to think for her, or to yield to her in so supreme a matter. She has not thought for me in taking the joy offered to her. Robbed of my property, I may surely do my utmost to regain it. Her act is no less cruel to me, because she meant me no ill; it is all the more cruel, because it does not give me the privileges of vengeance together with the right of reprisal. Am I to fold my hands meekly and perish uncomplainingly because she won't let

me loathe her, and thereby makes it so unutterably hard for me to regain what I have lost? Her goodness does not deprive me of my right to recover what she has taken from me. Nature's first law permits me to save myself from despair and death!"

Neither from the amber glory of the falling sun nor from the deepening twilight of the later hours came any soothing influence to Erica Rapier's mutinous spirit as she journeyed from the musical sea to the mighty city, speeding through scenes of umbrageous verdure and picturesque peacefulness. Unregardful of the beauties of earth and sky, Erica Rapier thought only of her own dismal defeat and selfish miseries, now magnifying them in her gloomy rage, and now discovering in their irritations new and stronger reasons for fighting stubbornly against man's law, and impiously against God's will. And as she welcomed the tempters that were fast qualifying her for Satan's service, at least one of her fellow-travellers from Winchester to London noticed the change that, creeping over her countenance, rendered it gradually a caricature of sullen wrath and stupid melancholy.

Beetling together with thick corrugations, Erica Rapier's brows lowered blackly over the swollen eyelids, whose distention afforded no concealment to the large eyes which ill-humour

deprived of their ordinary animation; and, whilst the brows drooped thus ominously over the lustreless orbs, her dark and harsh-haired scalp descended so as to take an inch from her forehead. At the same time losing their usual roundness, her small, brown cheeks buckled in under the high cheek-bones, and lengthened so as to aggravate the disagreeable effect of the alterations perceptible in the lower regions of the face, where the nostrils broadened and the lips protruded with a savage, beast-like pout, whilst the lower jaw dropped forwards and downwards with an almost idiotic heaviness. But it is easier to indicate the change of each feature than to describe the prevailing expression of the disfigured countenance.

A look, in which keen-witted moroseness was curiously blended with the dull wretchedness of fatuity, this expression would invite no particular attention in the galleries of a large lunatic asylum; but it is seldom encountered outside a mad-house. It was eloquent of something more than secret unrest and discomfort. To the physician, who entered Miss Rapier's carriage at the Winchester railway-station, it was recognizable at a glance as one of the most characteristic indications of mental disease.

"That poor lady's trouble is no passing cloud; there is insanity in her face!" said the doctor to

himself, when he had taken a deliberate view of the sufferer who might soon become his patient. Had this critical observer of a wretched visage been familiar with its owner's history, he would have seen that all the peculiar and exceptional vices of her nature—the falsehood and malice of her hereditary predisposition to wickedness, the dangerous perversities imparted to her reason and temper by poisonous education, the passions sown and quickened in her spirit by incessant mortification, the rancour begotten of the supreme trouble that had renewed simultaneously and with tenfold sharpness all the unforgotten pains of her many former griefs—were combining with depravities, in which she only resembled the rest of humankind, for one grand assault on the virtues and wholesome principles that had hitherto held them in check, if not in subjection. He would have known that in yielding to this confederacy of devils she would commit an enormous crime, or that in resisting her assailants to the end, with all the resoluteness of which even she might be supposed capable, she would perish in the conflict. It was a fit look for the woman who, whipped, and goaded, and drawn towards the perpetration of monstrous crime, was confirming herself in her resolution to take the coward's course, and find in wickedness an escape from despair.

In accounting thus precisely for Erica Rapier's misbehaviour, the writer of these words has no wish to extenuate its enormity. It would be bootless to frame excuses for offences too heinous for palliation.

In preferring her own contentment to the happiness of the man with whom she had for years been tenderly associated, and to the welfare of a woman to whom she was scarcely allied by the slenderest ties of personal acquaintance, Erica Rapier was guilty of nothing worse than natural and pardonable selfishness; and for the protection of her domestic interests and mental peace even moralists would think her entitled to the liberty of action that is conceded by common charity to the mother who, from mingled impulses of jealousy and fondness, would preserve her favourite son from an imprudent engagement, or to the sister who, from similar motives, would prevent her only brother from marrying a woman she distrusts and dislikes.

To keep Arthur Champion and Phyllis Lovelock asunder, Miss Rapier might have fairly employed almost any stratagem consistent with conventional honesty. To fence Phyllis off from his addresses, she might have used any artifices stopping short of sheer falsehood. Without exposing herself to universal reprobation, or, at least, without placing herself outside the pale of

human sympathy, she might have told untruths whose probable consequences would not be absolutely inhuman. But whilst no apology can be suggested for the means by which she hoped to prevent their union, her subsequent measures for marring it were even more execrable. Deadening all her finer instincts, jealous rage and selfish panic had driven compassion, truth, honour, pride, tenderness, refinement—in one word, had driven all *womanliness* from her breast, before she deliberately entertained the nauseous purpose of putting Phyllis out of Arthur Champion's reach by marrying her to a profligate, of whose meanness and uncleanness she was aware. And in all her later doings, to regain her former power over her brother-in-law, when he had passed from her hands to his second wife's dominion, she showed herself that saddest and most terrible of all wicked things, a resolutely evil woman.

CHAPTER II.

WEDDING BELLS.

WERE it not for the young and hopeful, whose feelings may not be altogether overlooked in a work of fiction, the pen which traces these lines should give no note of sounds that, ever glad-

dening to fresh climbers of the first ascents, are often mournful as a dirge to weary listeners on the downward slopes of life. Were all the world sad, little should be said of bridal braveries in a chapter that will be perused by many a reader to whom the pomps of death are not more melancholy than the festivals of love.

Time has dealt gently with the man who in his fiftieth year is stirred by no sorrowful recollections when, sitting at the bridal board, he hears the merry din of wedding guests. The wild music of the belfry is cruelly apt to remind the veteran of those other bells that whilom rang out no less clamorously for a joy that perished in a few short moons, and has no fuller record than a gravestone. However beautiful the bride to whom he lifts the sparkling glass, she is no lovelier than Ethel, who long syne died in her boyish husband's arms on their way out to India. However good and truthful, she cannot be purer of heart than Bessie, who, poor child, lived to be the scandal of the town. However triumphant, she in that respect only resembles Amy, who, fallen from wealth to indigence, is hiding her poverty in a Boulogne boarding-house. When the orator of the occasion expatiates on the bride's amiability, and congratulates the bridegroom's people on drawing within their lines so choice a specimen of womanly merit, the

grey and unsympathetic listener remembers how similar praise was lavished on Helen Bryce, whose scheming spirit and false tongue wrought discord in the gentle family that welcomed her with open arms and ludicrous enthusiasm, though she was only a poor governess of plain face and dubious story.

But though the gaiety may have vexed a few troubled spirits, and even quickened the gouty humour of some cynic at the breakfast, it can be readily imagined that, notwithstanding their nice experience and discernment in nuptial celebrations, the good people of Ryde had reason to applaud Mrs. Tournament's arrangements for her niece's wedding, which took place in St. John's Church within four months of the day that witnessed Arthur Champion's first interview with Phyllis in Kensington Gardens. Nor is it wonderful that local gossip still recalls Lady Champion's wedding as the most graceful thing of its kind ever looked upon by the inhabitants of the borough.

The spot favoured the event, and both were gainers from the benignity of the powers that in their control of the weather determined to give Phyllis all the proverbial benefit of bridal sunshine. Blotted here and there by a few slowly moving and grotesquely tumbled clouds, the blue sky looked down on a quiet sea that, visible

through openings in the umbrageous leafage of St. John's Hill, at one point gave the landscape a far distance of misty violet, and at another brightened out in gleaming plains of emerald green. At the same time, playing with the riot of distant bells, the light breeze carried the melody to the rustling groves of the suburban eminence, where the spirit of gracious neighbourliness had caused a numerous throng of kindly folk, gentle and simple, to range themselves along the road, so that clear way was left for the bride and her friends to pass to and fro on foot between Evensong and the church, under the cover of a tortuous line of overhanging trees.

Though the gallant train lacked neither the grace of peaceful stateliness nor the proper air of religious serenity, it must be admitted that the nuptial celebrants exceeded the highest number permissible to the "strictly quiet wedding" which Maud Tournament and Phyllis had in view at the outset of their preparations for the great event. For though they had lived in the state of seclusion commonly described as "being altogether out of the world," the ladies had friends in Ryde and other parishes of "the island," who would have felt themselves slighted had they not been asked to take part in the gala. They had "old friends" at Hartrest and in London with even stronger claims to the same attention; and

when Maud with her usual considerateness bethought herself of General Tournament's former comrades still lingering on the earth's surface, it was clear that courtesy required her to assume they would feel a strong interest in her niece's marriage. Then letters of congratulation flowed in upon Phyllis from young ladies, offering their ministerial services at her wedding in accordance with compacts which the future Lady Champion had clean forgotten, but could not on that ground avoid. And on seeing how cheerfully Mrs. Tournament enlarged her field of hospitable enterprise, Arthur Champion begged leave to bring a strong contingent of his Indian and Parlimentary friends to the gathering. So the wedding that was to have been a very modest affair became a big business.

Now on the threshold of her fourteenth year Beatrice was selected for the honour of first bridesmaid, in the place of Aunt Erica, who, with equal firmness and gaiety of humour, declined to accept the post of dignity, for which, with something more than the whole truth, she declared herself too old by at least a quarter of century. But though she declined to "make a goose of herself by leading the ministering damsels," Miss Rapier came to the wedding with a countenance and costume and fund of piquant persiflage, that made her a chief ornament and

source of animation to the party. And whilst this lady exercised no less discretion than fortitude in playing an insincere and acutely painful part with every appearance of naturalness and enjoyment, Cyril Twyford's bearing showed how greatly he had profited by her instructions in the difficult arts of masking disappointment and controlling strong emotion.

Having no suspicion that it had been chosen and bought by Miss Rapier of Thurlow Lodge, Phyllis was tenderly touched by the manifest costliness of Cyril's contribution to her display of wedding-presents, though she would have preferred a less sumptuous gift from the cousin whose poverty was now no secret to her. At the same time she was moved to a deeper and altogether unalloyed pleasure by the affectionateness that qualified his demeanour to her on the eve and morning of her marriage. Nor was Sir Arthur Champion without special reasons for thinking favourably of the artist who, after "giving away the bride" with an air of almost paternal gentleness, proposed her health at the ensuing banquet in a way that brought tears to Maud Tournament's eyes, and even disposed her to penitence for having treated the scapegrace precisely in accordance with his deserts.

By thus relenting to her nephew, however, Mrs. Tournament only provoked a short, sharp,

disdainful protest from Mr. Max, who, rightly referring the signs of his mistress's emotion to her nephew's eloquence, tossed up his head and threw a single yap of unqualified contempt at the orator as soon as the speech on its conclusion had received its meed of human approval. And this dissentient voice was all the more effective because, instead of barking out and about after the wont of ordinary dogs at seasons of domestic jubilee, Mr. Max had maintained an unbroken silence from the early hour of the morning, when he made a ceremonious toilet, and, after putting on his "best company manners," threw himself into the business of the day with canine zeal and super-canine sagacity.

CHAPTER III.

GOOD DOG!

SHOULD he ever receive such biographic honours as have been awarded to several less deserving individuals of his own species, to say nothing of the species that arrogates to itself an obvious and immeasurable superiority to all other kinds of living things, it is to be hoped that Mr. Max's historians will take pains to gather precise information respecting his demeanour throughout the day of his younger mistress's marriage.

It was remarked by Mrs. Tournament's guests that, without once looking backwards for instruction or any hint of encouragement, he walked at the head of the bridal procession from Evensong to the church, with an unhesitating directness which showed he was as fully alive to the purpose of the assembly as any of the long string of bipeds who, following at his heels, had received written intelligence of the nature of the day's business. Stopping at the church porch out of proper regard to the order that forbade creatures of his sort to enter the sacred building, he regarded wistfully the train of hymeneal celebrants who had the privilege of *entrée*. But when bride and bridegroom, parsons and clerk, maidens and groomsmen, crowded into the vestry to sign the register, they found Mr. Max sitting seriously before the open folio in the chamber of record, which he had entered by its outward portal during the religious service; and, being allowed to remain as a witness of the secular business, he watched with jealous vigilance the action of each of the ceremonious signatories, and on its execution confirmed each signature with a nod of vivacious concurrence. Instead of forcing himself on Phyllis's attention at this stage of the proceedings, and exacting caresses from her benignity, he withdrew to a respectful distance from her and her friends as soon as her right

hand had put two light pats on his big head; and, when the procession had re-formed itself for the homeward promenade, he placed himself again at its head without a single note of obstreperous excitement, and led it back to Evensong with silent dignity.

The same noiselessness and discretion characterized his behaviour throughout the breakfast. For though he was accustomed to share his mistress's meals, taking at each repast to his own capacious maw three times as much food as the two ladies, he now showed his nice sense of decorum by holding himself aloof from the festal board, and watching the waiters from one or another of the corners of the room. Once only during the banquet did Mr. Max leave the scene of entertainment, and then he quitted it to follow in the track of a waiter who, with more care for future enjoyment than immediate duty, took a bottle of champagne from the sideboard, and, hastening to the garden, put it under cover of a box-thicket. Catching the pilferer on his way back to menial service, Mr. Max inflicted summary punishment and an enduring mark of disapproval on the calf of his leg, and three minutes later re-appeared at the sideboard, holding in his mouth the recovered bottle, which he forthwith laid at the feet of the chief butler without a word of needless explanation.

At the moment, however, of Phyllis's departure for the yacht appointed to carry her over the water to Portsmouth, Mr. Max seized the opportunity for offering her his personal congratulations, and indemnifying himself for his previous reticence and self-suppression by an outbreak of vociferous gladness that did justice to the vehemence of his emotions.

No sooner was her carriage heard at the front door than, bounding out upon the lawn, Max raced round the garden, leaping over flower-beds and shrubs, whilst he rent the air and smote the blue sky with his clamorous tongue. As Phyllis took her seat in the open barouche, and gave the crowded porch her parting smiles in acknowledgment of a stinging shower of rice, Mr. Max's bark grew louder, and his movements more wildly perilous to himself and those with whom he came in collision; and when the horses, caracoling and prancing in their surprise at smart blows from overshot slippers, turned out of the garden-drive into the highway, he tossed to the breeze all care for his official responsibilities and the safety of his neck, and went amiably mad.

Having made the circuit of the carriage ten times as it descended St. John's Hill at a trot, and having in the course of each gyration narrowly escaped the feet of the mettlesome horses, Mr. Max was in the act of leaping up joyfully

at his younger mistress, when his jubilant and vociferous progress was suddenly ended by a misadventure that threw him on his back and turned him tail over head into a dry ditch, from which, with all his vigour and activity, he could not raise himself before the equipage at a quickened speed had passed from sight.

Satisfied with his efforts to bid the happy pair "good speed," or feeling that he had lost the opportunity of rendering the farewell more emphatic, Mr. Max, on recovering his feet and the highway, wheeled about and returned with undiminished excitement to Evensong, where, to the infinite amusement of the visitors, sauntering among the flower-beds on the smoothest and greenest of lawns, he first worked off some of his superabundant nervous energy by racing and barking wildly round the garden, and then held with Mr. Cyril Twyford a lively colloquy that may, for the purpose of this work, be regarded as the end of the day's festivity.

The artist was standing within two or three feet of Erica Rapier, who, having lured him away from the main body of the spectators of the diverting scene, was feeding him with some seasonable and strictly confidential predictions of the bride's future wretchedness, when his attention was withdrawn from the lady's consolatory speech by the dog's eccentric behaviour. Ap-

proaching the object of his cordial detestation by a series of circular movements, that were attended with no small injury to Mrs. Tournament's flowers, Mr. Max brought himself to an almost erect attitude, whilst, changing his previous voice of amiable gladness for notes of malicious mockery, he turned upon the painter a long stream of short, sharp, derisive barks. More than once, in the course of his remarks, Mr. Max, losing his balance on his hind legs, dropped to his fore-feet; but each descent was so momentary that he may be said to have maintained the straight and human attitude till he had said all he wished to say to the painter on his absurd presumption, manifold demerits, and ludicrous discomforture. And as he spoke out his whole mind in this curious fashion, it did not escape his nearest auditors how the menacing brightness of two keen eyes pointed his utterances, and how his visage was animated at every point with a look of satanic cleverness.

"Clever brute!" remarked Erica Rapier, in an undertone equally expressive of admiration for the dog and of disdain for the dog's victim. "He knows all your story, and is laughing at you—ay, laughing at you to your very face!"

"Perhaps he knows your story also!" retorted Cyril Twyford, with a mutinous sneer and a vin-
tive tone that were not lost on his companion.

"If he knows it," Erica answered coolly, "he has proper consideration for a woman's weakness, and is too much of a gentleman to laugh at me."

"If I should repay him by-and-by with a bullet or a bit of poisoned meat," returned Mr. Cyril Twyford, "I should not kill him without provocation. I have ere now been tempted to put an end to the brute."

"Resist the temptation!" replied Erica, wondering when the dog would have done talking. "Yield to it, and you will be guilty of murder. And heaven knows you have sins enough to answer for already."

"Silence, you fool!—go to heel!" growled the artist.

"Silence him by all means, if you can, Mr. Twyford. But that fierce look of yours," said Miss Rapier, "won't quell him. It is much more likely to hurt you. Half the people in the garden are watching us. At present they are laughing at the *dog;* but scowl in that way for another minute, and they will be laughing at *you.*"

"Go down, you brute!" cried Cyril Twyford, regardless of his companion's hint, as he raised his voice sharply, and at the same instant lifted a cane he was carrying in his right hand, as though he meant to flog his tormentor, who

having to the last bark delivered his scornful message, was even then on the point of dropping down for the last time, and going elsewhere for kindlier sport.

A more imprudent act the artist could not have committed; for it stirred all the fiercer fire of Mr. Max's occasionally turbulent spirit, and caused him instantly to spring with flashing eyes and open jaws, and whitely-gleaming teeth, at the uplifted arm. In justice to the man it must be admitted that even in his quick gust of ill-humour he had no purpose to strike the dog. Had the case been otherwise, his temerity would have met a heavy punishment; for the descending hand would have felt the incisive grip of the animal, whose misapprehension and consequent miscalculation caused him only to send his "ivories" through the artist's coatsleeve, instead of burying them in his flesh. The gravest result, therefore, of an incident that drew an exclamation of alarm from twenty different voices, and whitened Miss Rapier's face with momentary terror, was an injury that the tailor could set right.

Another and scarcely less important consequence of Mr. Max's ebullition of anger was his immediate retirement from the company that he had thrown into so lively a panic. But though he went straight to his particular cabin in the

rear of the house, it may not be imagined that he retreated to his private apartment in the character or with the appearance of a criminal. It was not his wont to sneak out of his most serious peccadilloes with his tail between his legs. Had he left his enemy dead amongst the flowers, he would have withdrawn from the duel with the air of a gentleman who had rendered society a needful though melancholy service. Having neither killed the painter, nor watered the turf with a single drop of his blood, Mr. Max moved away to his peculiar corner of the earth's surface unsubdued and unabashed, with his tail pointed well upwards, and his countenance turned steadily towards his spectators, who did not fail to remark that he held between his firmly-closed lips the strip of dark-blue cloth, which he had torn from Mr. Twyford's sleeve.

Mr. Max's pardonable outbreak of emotion occurring shortly before the time appointed for the dispersion of the assembly, he might have flattered himself that his premature retirement set the example for the departures that followed it during the next thirty minutes. But he was far too modest and sagacious to over-rate his influence so egregiously; and, as he heard the retreating wheels, the only feeling the sounds occasioned him was a generous regret that his indiscretion deprived him of the pleasure of

seeing them off the premises with proper valedictory riot.

Ere this regret had ceased to trouble him, all was quiet as any Sunday evening in the gardens and vicinity of Evensong. Guests from London had gone off to catch the boat and evening train for town, whilst others were driving through green lanes to their homes in different parts of the island. Miss Rapier, with Beatrice under her wing and Archie by her side, was on her way for Fairholt, with the design of spending a few weeks in that rural retreat; and Cyril Twyford, after taking affectionate leave of his Aunt Tournament, was sitting in the smoke-room of the Pier Hotel, whence he would start on the morrow for Homburg and Baden-Baden, with a purse replenished by Erica Rapier's artful munificence.

"The money will be squandered at roulette and rouge-et-noir; but the services I require of him must be paid for liberally," she remarked to herself a few days before the wedding, as she wrote the cheque that a few hours later caused the artist's eyes to brighten with ignoble delight. Though the money was given under the pretext of payment for pictures she had commissioned him to paint, Mr. Cyril Twyford was fully alive to the real considerations which had determined her to put a thousand pounds at his disposal.

CHAPTER IV.

WHO CAN HE BE?

THE soul's raiment is never of one colour or a single material. Ever delighting to mingle threads of different hues, the Great Weaver shoots the woof of poetry athwart the warp of prose; and, whether they be for Fortune's favourites or the children of Adversity, the textures which come from his cunning hands are so wrought that every robe of circumstance has something in its substance or pattern to remind the wearer of finer or homelier clothing.

No marvel, therefore, that the music of Arthur Champion's honeymoon covered passages of unromantic interest, and that amidst the excitements of love's perfect triumph he could leave Phyllis for the earlier part of a day to her own society, whilst he drove about Brussels calling on bankers and lawyers with whom he had affairs of business in connection with property to which he had succeeded by his cousin's death. But ere she was thus left at the Bellevue Hotel to dream of love or write letters, whilst her lord discoursed with his agents of money, Lady Champion had been married long enough to have become accustomed to the sound of her new name and title. Crossing the sea by a long passage that had no

terrors for a sailor's daughter with some experience of yachting, she had landed for the first time on foreign soil at Ostend, and hastened on with her husband to Bruges, where she stayed to see the pictures and take a sketch of the market-place. On the morrow they climbed the Ghent belfry, and at midday heard the rattle of the sabots on the wooden bridges. Next day Phyllis sipped her coffee at Antwerp in an open window of the Place Verte, whilst the famous tower of the great cathedral rained down upon her the gentle, joyful, rippling tunes of the carillons that are so agreeable to tourists making acquaintance with the Flemish towns. And of Brussels, where she was now resting, she had seen enough to wonder she had heard so little of its picturesqueness and peculiar gaiety. With happiness filling her heart, and novelties meeting her at every turn, Phyllis would have enjoyed her first continental trip prodigiously, even if she had made it in the company of a party of schoolgirls, and under the government of a serious chaperon. With Arthur Champion by her side to hang on her words, exult in her delight, anticipate her questions, and cosset her with smiles, she brimmed over with a simple gladness that was none the less womanly for being sometimes qualified by an almost childish simplicity.

Nor is it surprising that, when she had written

letters to Aunt Tournament and Miss Rapier, and kept her promise to send her scapegrace cousin Cyril a line before the end of her second week on foreign soil, Lady Champion thought it would be pleasanter in the park, where she would have the chatter of children and their nurses to amuse her, than in her rooms that caught the full heat of the morning's sun.

What she had seen of Brussels only quickened her desire to see more of its animating brightness, and her growing affection for the little capital of many attractions had in no degree lessened the sense of novelty that renders even the dullest of provincial towns charming to the inexperienced tourist. Arthur had taken her to the cathedral and the palaces, and in his company she had been the round of the art-galleries and lace shops, the principal theatres and historic buildings. They had loitered in the greener boulevards, and taken delightful drives in the Bois de la Cambre. And now Phyllis felt it would be vastly pleasant and slightly adventurous to visit the park, with no attendant but her maid Isabel, and await her husband's reappearance on the seat in the shady nook hard by the fountains and palaces, where he had promised to seek her, should she leave the hotel before the uncertain time of his return from conferences with his men of business.

him close to the woman he still loved with all the fervour of a warm and unselfish heart, "I knew you as soon as I saw you."

"And your smile recalled you to my mind in a few seconds."

"I am looking about for Sir Arthur Champion."

"He will come to me in the course of an hour; but for the moment I am without him. How did you hear of my marriage?"

"From the English papers. And I need not assure you, Lady Champion," said Mr. Owen Daylesford, taking possession of the seat near Phyllis, from which Isabel had withdrawn opportunely, taking her novel to another bench where she was within her mistress's sight, though unable to hear her words with the English clergyman, "that my first thought at the news was a wish for your happiness."

"May I acknowledge your kindness with similar congratulations, Mr. Daylesford? No? —not yet?"

"Not yet, nor ever," replied Owen Daylesford, with mingled sadness and playfulness. "Like Mrs. Tournament, I am an invalid; at least, so much of an invalid that it is enough for me to take care of myself, without being so helpless and meek as to wish for a wife to take care of my health for me."

advantage when she is unexpectedly confronted by a former admirer; and the look which, accompanying the blush, survived it by several seconds, would have told any discriminating observer that Phyllis, in the heart of her honeymoon, knew she was looking towards a man who had at one time regarded her with a flattering preference.

The gentleman was the first of those ineligible suitors whom Maud Tournament diverted from her niece for better reasons than she cared to avow; and it was from Maud's blabbing tongue that Phyllis heard of the affair some years after its occurrence.

"Miss Lovelock is young, but I can wait," urged the young curate of St. John's, seeing in Mrs. Tournament's face a look unfavourable to his hopes.

"Young? She is only seventeen."

"Tell me I may marry her when she is twenty-seven."

"Her age is not the only objection."

"It is no great fortune I can offer her, Mrs. Tournament. But I have some means; and all I have will be hers, if she will condescend to take all I can give her."

"That is not the objection. You are well-looking, well-mannered, well-taught, and of a good family. You have good principles, and

him close to the woman he still loved with all the fervour of a warm and unselfish heart, "I knew you as soon as I saw you."

"And your smile recalled you to my mind in a few seconds."

"I am looking about for Sir Arthur Champion."

"He will come to me in the course of an hour; but for the moment I am without him. How did you hear of my marriage?"

"From the English papers. And I need not assure you, Lady Champion," said Mr. Owen Daylesford, taking possession of the seat near Phyllis, from which Isabel had withdrawn opportunely, taking her novel to another bench where she was within her mistress's sight, though unable to hear her words with the English clergyman, "that my first thought at the news was a wish for your happiness."

"May I acknowledge your kindness with similar congratulations, Mr. Daylesford? No? —not yet?"

"Not yet, nor ever," replied Owen Daylesford, with mingled sadness and playfulness. "Like Mrs. Tournament, I am an invalid; at least, so much of an invalid that it is enough for me to take care of myself, without being so helpless and meek as to wish for a wife to take care of my health for me."

you shall have my leave to pay your addresses to Phyllis. But, should he be unable to give you the assurance, you are so loyal and brave I am sure you would not ask me to countenance your suit."

"This is quite a new thought to me, my dear Mrs. Tournament," said young Owen Daylesford sadly, kissing Maud's hand gently before he added, "and it is a painful thought, but from my heart I thank you for it."

In the following week the young clergyman wrote from London a few words of affectionate farewell to Mrs. Tournament. Instead of returning to Ryde he went to the south of France, without hope or desire to be Phyllis Lovelock's husband. He went thither also with a brave purpose of avoiding marriage as a field of happiness he was forbidden to enter. Maud Tournament spoke only the truth in crediting the young clergyman with high principle; and he saw clearly that the considerations, which would not let him woo Phyllis, forbade him to marry any other girl.

CHAPTER V.

WHAT THEY SAID.

"DEAR LADY CHAMPION," exclaimed Owen Daylesford, when quickening steps had brought

him close to the woman he still loved with all the fervour of a warm and unselfish heart, "I knew you as soon as I saw you."

"And your smile recalled you to my mind in a few seconds."

"I am looking about for Sir Arthur Champion."

"He will come to me in the course of an hour; but for the moment I am without him. How did you hear of my marriage?"

"From the English papers. And I need not assure you, Lady Champion," said Mr. Owen Daylesford, taking possession of the seat near Phyllis, from which Isabel had withdrawn opportunely, taking her novel to another bench where she was within her mistress's sight, though unable to hear her words with the English clergyman, "that my first thought at the news was a wish for your happiness."

"May I acknowledge your kindness with similar congratulations, Mr. Daylesford? No? —not yet?"

"Not yet, nor ever," replied Owen Daylesford, with mingled sadness and playfulness. "Like Mrs. Tournament, I am an invalid; at least, so much of an invalid that it is enough for me to take care of myself, without being so helpless and meek as to wish for a wife to take care of my health for me."

"But you look much stronger than you were in the old days at Ryde."

"And I am all I look. Thank God, I am strong enough for my appointed work," said the gentleman, seriously but cheerily, "and what more should a man wish for?"

"If you were as strong as you are good, you would have no need to wish yourself stronger!" said Phyllis, speaking from her heart without a care whether she said more or less than the right thing.

"What can you know of my goodness?" returned Mr. Daylesford, laughing cordially.

"Little but what a few old people of Ryde have told me. They remember you still at St. John's, and always kindly."

"Then talk to me about them. Tell me everything about them, except what they say of me," cried the gentleman, with unaffected pleasure, as he proceeded to pour on his companion a stream of questions that soon produced a strong counter-current of news about his former friends in the Wight.

"And now give me news of yourself for Aunt Tournament," said Phyllis, when she had answered more questions in half-an-hour than a gentlewoman usually answers in six weeks. "Do you still live in the south of France?"

"How came you to think of me as living in the

south of France?" inquired Mr. Daylesford, with a movement of surprise.

"We understood you went from Ryde to Nice."

"Surely I did so," returned the young clergyman, with the air of a person reminded of a time that had slipped from his memory. "But," he added, "I stayed there only for six months, when I had an offer of my church in this capital. I am one of the English residents of Brussels; and if you are staying here for any time, it would give me great pleasure to offer you and Sir Arthur Champion the attentions English visitors are now and then good enough to accept from English residents."

"You are very kind to say so; but my husband will finish to-day the business that determined us to pass through Brussels on our wedding trip, and to-morrow we start for Cologne. So the pleasure of seeing you at your home must be deferred. Is your church *in* Brussels?"

"In Brussels and in this quarter. I am the pastor of the English church of St. Augustine. Mine is the largest of the English churches here; and it is agreeably placed between the Rue de Louvain and the Boulevard de l'Observatoire. The windows of my house look across the Jardin de l'Observatoire, and have a view of the boulevard of the same name, with its car-

riages and loiterers, through the openings of the trees."

"And you live alone?"

"On the contrary, I am a member of as happy a domestic circle as can be found in all Brussels. You remember my sister Kate—Mrs. Wilbraham? She lost her husband while I was at Nice, and ever since his death she and her children (two charming girls) have lived with me. And within the enclosure of my garden stands the residence of my other sisters."

"Your other sisters?" said Phyllis, with a look and tone of surprise. "I thought Mrs. Wilbraham was your only sister!"

"And she is the only sister with the right to call me 'brother,'" replied the clergyman, smiling with amusement as he gave the needful explanation. "The residence is the home for my Nursing Sisters. They resemble Sisters of Charity in everything but title and costume. They dress as they please, and style themselves Nursing Sisters. I can assure you, though they seldom number more than eight, my Nursing Sisters of St. Augustine are honourably known and well beloved in Brussels."

"Are they French or Belgian?"

"All of them are English: gentlewomen who are perhaps slightly singular in thinking gentlewomen should be useful, and can for the moment

find no fitter field of usefulness than service to the sick and poor."

"Is it an old institution?"

"It has been at work for some years."

"Was it in existence before you came to Brussels?"

But to this simple and direct question Mr. Daylesford's reply was a repetition of his former words, "It has been at work for some years."

"You founded it!" ejaculated Phyllis, her countenance brightening with joy, pride, and sympathy.

"It is supported by voluntary contributions," replied the young clergyman, avoiding the question of foundation as a matter of no importance.

"I need not ask whether it is well supported!" said Phyllis, resolving as she spoke to become a contributor towards the college of nursing sisters before the year ended.

"Charity flourishes everywhere, Lady Champion; and an institution so needful as the nursing sisters could not fail to find supporters in Brussels, with its large colony of English."

"I had not thought of fellow-country-people in this foreign place!" remarked Phyllis, in a tone of self-reproach. "And there is poverty amongst them?"

"The poor are with us always and everywhere, and various influences drive and draw our indi-

gent fellow-countrymen to Brussels in numbers that would astonish and trouble you if I gave you the particulars."

"Heaven's mercy!" cried Phyllis, in the old tone that conquered Owen Daylesford's heart years ago at Ryde. "And I in my happiness have been thinking all the world happy here."

"And some of our English in Brussels are as happy as even you could wish them, dear Miss Lovelock—pardon me, 'Lady Champion' I should have said," rejoined the clergyman, with momentary confusion at his forgetfulness of the young lady's matronly quality and style. After a pause he added cheerfully, "Brussels has a goodly contingent of happy English families, and much delightful English society, I can assure you. Ever since Waterloo it has been an attractive capital to wealthy English folk who like continental life, and enjoy it most in places where they conceive themselves to be held in proper honour. There are those of our English nobility who prefer Brussels to Paris, and find Leopold's Court more agreeable to their self-love than Louis Philippe's grandeur and more brilliant *entourage*. Moreover, Brussels still deserves the reputation for cheapness which at an earlier period of the present century it enjoyed in common with Paris; and the buying-power of its francs enhances the attractiveness of Brussels,

gay little Brussels, to the younger sons and other gentlemen of our aristocracy, who, with wives to maintain and children to educate on incomes of from eight to sixteen hundred pounds, have sound economical reasons for delighting in a capital where a thousand a year goes farther than twice that income in London. And then there are the English boarding-schools—right happy places, as you may learn from any-one who, like me, visits them at all hours in the way of duty."

"I am thankful the picture has a brighter side. But how about the poor? Where do they come from? Tell me more of them!" said Phyllis, showing no want of sympathy for the fortunate, whilst revealing her livelier care for the miserable.

"My English poor," was the answer, "come of course from England in the first instance. But most of them wander here from other continental places. Every continental town of any importance has its colony of English, most of whom are in actual need, or living on the borders of indigence; and when they are nearing their last sous they move to Brussels, if they have not come there already. The notion that life may be sustained on almost anything in Brussels gives us our crowds of wretched English with nothing to live upon. The gambler who has been ruined at Homburg or Baden-Baden brings

his empty pockets to Brussels. Swindlers, flying from their creditors in Paris, seek asylum under St. Gudule. Of course we have also a proportion of luckless people who come to us straight from dear Old England. Every great commercial collapse in London, Manchester, Liverpool, brings us a fresh wave of English destitution and shame —refugees who cross the water by the Ostend and Antwerp steamboats, and coming here with a little money in their purses, gravitate quickly to pauperism—sometimes to a pauperism qualified by irregular remittances from England, but oftener to a pauperism that closes in open mendicancy and starvation. This multitude of wretches comprises persons of different extractions and experiences, from adventurers who were at one time gentlemen, to vagabonds who at their best were only dissolute servants and mechanics. If it were made up only of men it would have less of my pity; but the fallen and sinking men almost always have women and children who are sinking with them."

"And these are the poor to whom your nurses minister?" said Phyllis, with a pitiful tenderness divided equally between the children of sorrow and the angels of benevolence.

"Why did you lead me on to pain you?" asked Owen Daylesford regretfully, as he saw tears rising in Lady Champion's eyes.

"I am grateful to you for paining me. Such pain is good for those who are so happy as I am," was the rejoinder. After a pause the speaker inquired, "And do these ladies persist in their labour for years together?"

"Some of them have lived in St. Augustine's Home, or at the bedsides of poor patients, ever since the institution was opened. Others have worked awhile under my observation, and then passed to other interests—not from fickleness or any kind of frivolity, but from mindfulness for other duties. It does not follow that a woman should nurse the poor to the end of her days because she is impelled by stern circumstances and righteous motives to do so for a season."

"And, wherever she may go on leaving you, a woman would be better and stronger for the discipline of such service."

"I trust so. Anyhow, I could not impute it as weakness to her because a Sister of Mercy declined to be a martyr. There is a point where self-sacrifice loses its beauty and shrinks to fanaticism. It was a happy day for me last year when one of St. Augustine's nurses came to me with a joyful face, and told me she was returning to the home from which a strange calamity had driven her only for a time. She was a sweet, gentle, lovely creature, who in an hour of strange domestic trouble found shelter and employment

under St. Augustine's care. On the disappearance of the trouble, she took her leave of us. And I have no doubt she is as much God's servant in a happy English home, with her husband and children, as she was during her time of trial in a foreign land."

"She went back to her husband and children, and is happy with them now?" asked Phyllis, with the eagerness of a child demanding reassurance of the happy ending of a doleful tale.

"And she could not have found in the whole world a more secure and salutary resting-place than St. Augustine's Home, whilst her strange affliction made work and concealment alike needful for her."

It showed the quickness and force of her sympathies, and how readily they influenced her imagination, that taking to herself the story so delicately hinted rather than told, and overlooking for the moment all the circumstances, which might well have afforded her a sense of security from similar trouble, Phyllis remarked, with a sweetly pathetic seriousness, laying her right hand the while lightly on her companion's shoulder, as though he were her brother,

"No woman in such sad mischance *could* have a better place of refuge. And should it ever come to me to wring my hands and cry, 'Whither can I fly from this grief and shame?' I will

remember St. Augustine's Home of Nursing Sisters, and I will come to you and say, 'Give me a little room to hide myself in, and give me work to do for my soul's peace, till the storm has burst and the sun shines on me again.'"

"There is little fear, Lady Champion," returned the clergyman, startled and stirred by her earnestness, "that you will ever be driven here by any such wild hurricane of calamity."

"But there is the possibility of it. Stranger things happen daily in this puzzling world, where God so often works His merciful ends in ways that seem unutterably cruel."

"But such sorrow as befell the lady whose case I referred to came of wickedness, and can issue from no other cause."

"And wicked people may approach me!" said Phyllis calmly.

"But they could not hurt you," returned her companion, speaking his sincere thought in perfect innocence of trivial gallantry, "for the evil of their hearts would perish when you looked at them."

Fortunately for the friends, whose talk had come to a point threatening them with embarrassment, Lady Champion's sense of humour was so tickled by this comical outbreak of homage to her goodness that she could close the interview lightly.

"You had better leave me now, for you cannot hope to pay me a prettier or more extravagant compliment," said this bride of ten days' standing, as she extended her hand for the farewell pressure.

Three minutes later, on entering the park by one of the smaller gates, Sir Arthur Champion passed a young clergyman, whose bright brown eyes and pleasant aspect caused the baronet to remark to himself,

"If he were not so pigeon-breasted and high-shouldered, and carried a little more flesh on his bones, that tall parson would be a well-looking fellow."

And Arthur Champion was still reviewing this judgment, when Phyllis, rising from her seat, came to meet him.

"I have been chatting with an old Ryde friend, a clergyman who was one of the curates of St. John's in dear old Wight, and we have had such a pleasant gossip about people of the island. You must have met him near the gate as you came into the park."

In another minute, had Arthur given her any encouragement to pursue the subject, Phyllis would probably have told him all that had passed between her and the pastor of St. Augustine's Church, and even have confessed that she had in former time inspired the clergyman with a grand

neighbours, with the occasional help of an additional "gun" from London, satisfied the natural desire of these birds of brilliant plumage, Phyllis drove about the neighbourhood with Aunt Tournament, returning the calls of ladies whose names and titles might well have been overpoweringly historic and impressive to the still girlish creature who only a few weeks since had declared she would die of dignity if a cruel fate made her a duchess. And towards the close of Maud Tournament's stay under her niece's roof, the mistress of Queenscote had Beatrice and Miss Rapier of Regent's Park on her hands,—Beatrice overflowing with childish enthusiasm for her new mamma, and Erica in her gayest manner and sunniest looks and heartiest voice, whilst the hidden rage at her heart was quickened to fiercest fury by the child's worship of Phyllis.

Readers shall not be bored with an elaborate description of all the staircases and passages and bed-rooms of Sir Arthur Champion's ancestral home; but, for their entertainment's sake, something must be said in the fewest words of the outward show and internal plan of the stately house. Standing on the highest spot of a small park, that, together with younger wood, contained oaks and beeches to be extolled as perfect studies of picturesque timber, the mansion of red stone, built during the Long Parliament,

and enlarged in the time of Queen Anne, was surrounded by spacious gardens, and by lawns that lost their verdant and velvety smoothness on passing into the wildest, roughest, coarsest breadth of grass-land ever commended by artists for being "exactly what a park should be." Billowy and hillocky everywhere, this park had in places lost none of the characteristics that caused seventeenth century conveyancers to describe it slightingly as so many acres of "scrub and briery." A tumbled plain of thicket and pitfalls within four hundred yards of the hall-windows, it grew wilder and wilder as it dropped southwards, till it became a mere wilderness of bush, and bracken, and gorse, that, at the right season, showed forth in gorgeous masses of colour near the park paling and the church corner, when the rays of the falling sun swept athwart it. And the effect of the picturesque disorder and confusedness was heightened by the unaccountable and contradictory positions of half-a-score bits of beech-avenue and chestnut-avenue —survivals possibly of some undiscoverable design of arboriculture, though in their curious game of cross purposes they seemed bent and set rigidly on proving they had never been in any way connected witth one another.

Thus placed in wide gardens and carefully-kept lawns, belted with the rudely beautiful

park, Queenscote House had its principal entrance on the north side, in the form of a large porch, built boldly out from the body of the mansion, and fitted with heavy, oak doors in the outer and inner arch. Lighted on either side by a large window, this porch was as capacious as an ordinary dining-room; and, on passing the interior doorway of the ample entrance, the visitors found themselves in an oblong room big enough for a parliament chamber. High as the walls of the mansion, and commanding from its five bay-windows a perfect view of the southward slopes of the park, this lofty chamber was all of the house that lay between the two wings. And the furniture of the chamber harmonized with its stately dimensions.

From the floor of polished oak to the vaulted ceiling, coated with curious designs in bas-relief, the walls to north and south were decorated with life-size portraits, pictures of the chase, hunting trophies, gun-racks, and antique weapons. Complete suits of chain-armour and plate-armour, fitted on stands, were conspicuous on either side of the room. At the same time there were indications that the hall was not solely devoted to pictorial effect. A long dining-table stood in the middle of the Turkish carpet that covered a large portion of the floor; and the side-board at either end of the room was scarcely less signifi-

cant of hospitality. The recesses of the broad windows were provided with writing-tables and book-shelves. And in the warmer seasons of the year the room was never without a grand piano, and seldom without a table littered with newspapers, novels, and drawing materials. In winter the hall was used for balls and dinners of state. In the summer the Champions made it their ordinary living room—lunching and dining at the central table, and receiving their callers in it.

A word about the wings at either end of this noble passage. The western block comprised the drawing-rooms and the crimson parlour, used for a dining-room when it was too cold to dine in the great hall. In the eastern wing, visitors came upon two most important rooms of every well-appointed country house—the billiard-room and the library. Few amateurs played a better game of billiards than Sir Arthur Champion; and the most bookish of his several learned friends found in the library books they had never seen elsewhere. One thing to be especially remarked in connection with this library is the staircase leading from the place of study to the gallery, constructed originally for musicians, that, looking down upon the great hall from the eastern end, still remained a notable feature of the long chamber to persons looking at it from below.

By degrees this gallery had become an adjunct to the library, from which it was separated by a staircase with an upper and a lower door. Furnished with cases for books that could not be put away on the crowded shelves of the lower room, it was fast developing into an upper library when, for the comfort of students who were sometimes disturbed and hindered in their labours by the talkers in the hall, Sir John Champion (Arthur's grandfather) converted the south end of the gallery into the snuggest and quietest little study imaginable by fencing it in and covering it over with wainscot. Having shown no little ingenuity in constructing this tiny chamber, with adequate arrangements for the admission of light and fresh air, Sir John made "the cabinet" his peculiar place for study and letter-writing. And it would perhaps have affected the course of matters still to be narrated in these pages, had the constructor of this crafty little closet, in his contentment with its original excellencies, omitted to insert in some of its panels the small panes of clear, thick glass, by which he was enabled from his secret lurking-place to get a clear view of the larger part of the interior of the hall. If any readers of this page think of visiting Queenscote, it is well they should know of these peep-holes in the panels of the gallery cabinet. For the most innocent flirtation may

be enlivened by incidents that should not be witnessed by a third person.

With all her simplicity and freedom from paltry ambitions, it is conceivable that Phyllis felt the elation of triumph on crossing the threshold of her new home for the first time. As she scanned the pictures and raised her eyes to the embossed ceiling of the grand hall, she may well have experienced the complacence of innocent, girlish pride. On surveying the ample rooms, rich in things of beauty and the means of luxurious ease, she had reason to have delight in their magnificence and in the grandeur that had so quickly and mysteriously come upon her. When she explored the gardens—finding a fresh object for admiration at every turn of their attractive paths, encountering a new surprise in each nook of shrubbery, discovering at this point the tree that for the moment seemed lovelier than all the others, coming elsewhere to the spot that afforded a still better view of the house or the long terrace—she must needs have exulted in being the mistress of Queenscote.

For though she was descended from a score of gentle families, and, if she had been reared with princes, would have spent her childhood with no finer natures than the people to whom she was indebted for her life and training, it cannot be questioned that this child of an undistinguished

naval officer had passed by marriage from a comparatively humble station to a place of influence and dignity that many an earl's daughter, with beauty, and fashionable *éclat*, and Phyllis Lovelock's fortune thrice told, would have taken with gladness. To suggest that Phyllis was either insensible or indifferent to all the various circumstances that made up what "society," with more justice than good taste, called her "elevation," would be to discredit her intelligence even to the point of denying her the saving virtue of common sense. But far greater injustice would be done her generous temper and lofty spirit by hinting that she for a single instant regarded those circumstances as anything more than the superficial aspects and subordinate incidents of her blissful fortune. The core and heart of her soul's joy at being Queenscote's mistress was the thought that Queenscote was her Arthur's ancestral home, and that he had taken her from quiet ways and modest cares to be the queen of it.

CHAPTER VII.

AT FAIRHOLT.

ERICA RAPIER's first visit to Queenscote was not prolonged beyond the tenth day; and whilst Phyllis was exchanging civilities with her neigh-

bours, and winning golden opinions in her corner of Somersetshire, her husband's sister-in-law was tarrying at her Hampshire farm-house in the congenial society of Mr. Cyril Twyford, whom she invited to Fairholt for a few days upon his return to London from Baden-Baden.

At Homburg and afterwards at Baden, Cyril was accompanied by the lady who used his surname and styled herself mistress; and, as the artist had given her thirty pounds for new raiment, her appearance did him no discredit in the hotels they honoured with their presence, and at the public tables where they pricked cards and staked money with a most business-like air, and with a conscientious care for the requirements of their "system."

Whether he pursues fortune at rouge-et-noir or roulette, hazard or euchre, poker or blind hookey; whether he throws dice in a gilded hell, or cuts greasy cards in a tavern parlour; whether he makes a book for the Derby, or buys for the rise at Capel Court, your true, thorough-going, incorrigible gambler always goes to the devil on a "system,"—a system hitherto strangely overlooked by all other inventors of sure methods for making money out of nothing; and bound to enrich its discoverer beyond the wildest dreams of avarice, and drive to perdition all other madmen of his particular kind.

The system which the artist and Mrs. Twyford carried with them to the Continent, in perfect confidence that it would break the bank at Homburg and drain the Baden treasury, had occupied much of their attention from the beginning of the year to the auspicious day that saw them cross the water from Dover to Ostend. Night after night they had sat to early morning at 7A, Fitzroy Square, at opposite sides of the same green table, shuffling, cutting, and dealing their packs of red and white cards, paying one another their imaginary winnings and losings out of two bowls full of brass counters, taking note of every incident of the tedious course of their experiments, and holding earnest conference on events that made it obvious their system must be modified and amended.

The time and energy expended on the elaboration of this precious system would have produced a score of "pot-boilers," that the picture-dealers would have bought without haggling at twenty guineas a-piece. But the labour seemed to Cyril Twyford a ludicrously small price for the invention that would put him in easy circumstances for the remainder of his days. As he justly remarked, it would not be more absurd to think of making omelettes without breaking eggs, than to dream of inventing a system without time and trouble. And at last the system went so smooth-

ly and satisfactorily with the brass counters at the closing *séances* in Fitzroy Square, that the adventurers went off for the scenes of their future triumphs in the best of good spirits and an almost romantic state of mutual approbation. Dormant grievances notwithstanding, Mrs. Twyford thought herself a singularly fortunate woman in her possession of Cyril's fealty; and, on their arrival at Homburg, he was so pleased with her plain silk dress and pretty bonnet, that he exclaimed, with even more honesty than delicacy,

"By Jove! Marion, you look the genuine article, though you are only sham; and you'll do well enough if you remember at the *table-d'hôte* to open your mouth only to put food and drink into it."

But at Homburg the system disappointed its possessors, who, after ten days' operations, found themselves barely fifty pounds to the fore, after making allowance for their hotel expenses. There was a hitch in the system's working, a hitch necessitating more calculations, and another modification of the process. But when he had discovered what was wrong, and set it right, things went so well at Baden-Baden that the system brought Cyril three thousand pounds in a fortnight, and made him so critical of his drinks that the choicest and costliest wines of his hotel were not good enough for him. Fourteen days

later Mr. Twyford was "cleaned out," and would have left Baden in scandalous trouble, had not "the establishment" graciously provided him with the means of paying his hotel bill, and buying through tickets for London.

Had it not been for a picture-dealer's cheque for twenty guineas, found amongst the letters that had come to his chambers since his departure for the Continent, Cyril Twyford would have been in urgent straits for pocket-money on his return to town. And even with this timely remittance in his pocket, he murmured profanely against the extortionate charges of English railway companies, when he considered the cost of a trip to the neighbourhood of Portsmouth, after reading the note in which Erica Rapier invited him to Fairholt for the inside of a week.

At Fairholt, however, he met with a reception that would have reconciled him to the outlay, had his first-class ticket cost him more pounds than it cost shillings. Had Cyril Twyford been her own brother, Miss Rapier could not have received him more cordially. Had he been Sir Arthur Champion, she would not have made greater exertions for his comfort and pleasure. No longer the lady of wealth playing the patron's part to an undistinguished artist, or an eccentric woman of the world condescending to amuse herself with an arrant Bohemian, Erica treated

her visitor with the considerateness due to an intimate friend. Ay, more! It was her humour to rate him as one of her own domestic circle, out of regard for his close relationship to Phyllis. Having entreated him to think of her as a near relative, she forthwith bore herself to him as though they were cousins. And their intercourse was all the more confidential on account of the absence of Beatrice, who, at her dear new mamma's request, and by Aunt Erica's deliberately accorded permission, was still staying at Queenscote, on the understanding that she would return to her proper home at Thurlow Lodge at the opening of the coming new year.

Erica knew how to make people comfortable in her rural retreat. The wine came from her well-furnished cellars at Thurlow Lodge; and Cyril, whose nice epicurean discernment was the chief of his few redeeming virtues, had reason to congratulate himself on the sufficiency of the woman who served Mrs. Dade and Mrs. Dade's lodger in the capacity of cook. Of course the artist was not permitted to smoke in Erica's quarter of the house; but she invited him for her flowers' sake, as well as for his own comfort, to burn his cigars and tobacco freely in the garden and green-house, and introduced him to Mrs. Dade's best parlour with authority to use it as a smoke-room, should he at any time wish for a pipe between four walls.

After leading him to Mrs. Dade's parlour within an hour of his arrival, Miss Rapier took occasion to show her guest the interior plan of the house, which consisted, as the reader has been already told, of the original structure and a set of rooms of a later date.

A plain oblong building, with the windows of its longer walls looking east or west, the older part of the edifice was just such a modest, though substantial, dwelling as one would look for on a Hampshire farm of about a hundred acres. Containing on the ground-floor Mrs. Dade's "keeping-room," the "best parlour," an ample kitchen, a larger back-kitchen (otherwise styled "the scullery") and the entrance-passage (that dividing the two parlours from the two kitchens, and running from the kitchen garden on the west to the yard-door on the east, cut at right angles the long passage on the eastern side) the "old house" had five chambers upstairs with garrets over them.

Facing to the south, and built out to the right and left of the southward end of the original building, so that the entire structure was what the house-agents call a T-shaped mansion, Miss Rapier's peculiar quarters comprised a good entrance-hall with a large room on either side of it, an ample staircase, and five rooms, used either as sleeping-rooms or dressing-rooms. The

pleasant little garden, dropping southward from this block of building towards the park-like pasture noticed in previous pages of this history, was separated in one direction by a high brick wall from Mrs. Dade's kitchen garden, and screened by a corresponding wall in the other direction from the yards and farm-buildings to the north-east.

"Now you have surveyed the dimensions of my cottage, where I live 'unseen, unknown,' and might die unlamented by a single creature but poor, dear old Dade, tell me if you can conceive a cozier cell for an anchorite with a commendable weakness for the comforts of this life," said Erica Rapier to her companion on their return from the "best parlour" of the "old building" to the bright and elegant drawing-room of the "new house." "When I lose my temper in London, I find it at Fairholt after playing the part of a misanthrope on the easiest possible terms for a few days or weeks. This is the peaceful grave in which I bury myself whenever I wish to pass from the world, with power reserved (as the lawyers say) of returning to it at pleasure. Is it not a charming tomb?"

"If all graves offered as good accommodation for man and horse, I should like to die at once."

"The seclusion of the place is as perfect as its luxurious quietude and comfort," said the lady,

with an undeclared object in making her visitor realize the privacy of her retreat, and the furtive way in which she enjoyed its peculiar merit. "Indoors I am out of my servants' way, and they are out of mine. Dear old Dade, who is almost as deaf as a post, spends her time in her bed-room or her 'keeping-room.' The kitchens, where the servants live at the north end of the house, are so far away that, if they cooked for me with open doors, no sniff of simmering soup or roasting mutton would come to the dining-room before the right time. Approached only by the two long passages, the ground-floor passage and upper passage of the 'old house,' this block of building is divided from Mrs. Dade's tenement by a brick wall of treble thickness that no ordinary sound can penetrate, and at the passages by double doors of solid oak, so firmly fitted on this side with locks and bolts, that it would trouble a detachment of sappers and miners to break them open from the other side, when I have turned my keys and fixed my bars against intruders. Is not this security?"

"And privacy."

"Come with me into the garden if you would realize my safety from observation, and appreciate the strange solitariness of a place within a few hundred yards of a highway, within a mile and a half of a populous village, and within a few

miles of a far-reaching aggregation of busy towns," replied Erica Rapier, rising from her chair, and taking a broad-brimmed garden hat from a table near the seat.

Three minutes later they were standing in the middle of the garden's principal lawn (so small a lawn that it should rather be called a grass-plot), and looking by turns to every point of the compass. Whilst they were taking this survey of the scenery, their lips were silent. Nor did Erica Rapier speak many words as she conducted the artist round the grounds, and led him across the border of the pleasant garden into the paddocks dotted with beech and oak. It was enough for her to point with her tiny brown hand to the objects most deserving his consideration, and to leave the scenery to tell its own story. And whithersoever the imperious little hand pointed, the artist's eyes followed obediently. In the garden the hand pointed to the wall that screened the parterres from Mrs. Dade's windows, and to the corresponding wall that prevented workmen and loiterers in the yards from seeing the picturesque enclosure. In the paddocks it pointed in one direction to a distant church spire, in another direction to a farmstead three or four miles off. For a minute the hand pointing southward called attention to the northward slopes of the Portsdown's majestic green ridge,

and then with a series of little waves it made the stranger face about, and ordered him to let his vision travel slowly over the breadths of tranquil country that afforded Erica her longest and favourite walks.

"Well?" she asked, taking her hat off and letting the light noiseless breeze toss her brown crop into a becoming disorder, when they had regained the grassplot and the point of their preliminary survey of the landscape, "are we alone or in a crowd?"

"Another minute," was the answer, "if you had kept silent another minute, even with you by my side, I should have been companionless. The spirit of solitariness was covering and conquering me. Strange it should be so powerful in scenes so luxuriantly fertile and eloquent of pastoral plenty!"

"The loneliness," returned Erica, "is the more remarkable for being unattended by a single sign of desolation, a single hint or whisper of desolateness. The absence of human life is rendered so strangely impressive by the lavish superabundance of most familiar sources of human prosperity."

"It must be so."

"Here no one disturbs me," continued Miss Rapier, still speaking with a view to an end in the distant future. "I am more alone here than

I could be under the shadows of the pyramids. The green lane that leads to this farm is rutted in wet weather by tumbrils and wagons, but seldom touched by wheels of any more modish carriage than my pony-phaeton; and, were it not for my little carriage, there would be no sign of a wheel on the grass of the winding way by which I walk oftener than drive from my garden gate to the green lane. The tourists who march out from Portsmouth to climb the Portsdown seldom come nearer than the summit of the great ridge, and the few bolder pedestrians, bent on exploring the country north of the Portsdown, wander up the lane without turning out of their way to get a nearer view of my unhistoric house. It is not oftener than once in three months that my yard-dog's howl warns my people of an approaching tramp."

"And the inmates of Fairholt can't do much for your enlivenment?"

"Enlivenment? I come here when I am weary of life," returned the little dark-eyed misanthrope, with a note of disdainful bitterness. "Like the tourists they leave me alone, at least when I wish to be quit of them. I gossip now and then with Dade, partly to please the old body, and partly to revive my recollections of old times that gave me more wretchedness than joy. But I see little of the other people, and talk less

to them,—the old gardener and his wife who cooks so nicely for me, and the young woman who is house and parlour maid. When my children—I beg Lady Champion's pardon, I should have said Lady Champion's children—were quite little ones, I used to bring their ayah here. But that is long since. Once or twice I made the unsatisfactory experiment of bringing my maid with me from Regent's Park, but that experiment won't be repeated."

"I can conceive she would be only in the way when you are wooing solitude."

"As I could not give her enough employment here she watched me more than I liked; and on going up to town she gossiped of my doings, as though I were qualifying for a lunatic asylum. So I determined never to bring her here again."

"And without her the place suits you?" inquired Cyril Twyford, encouraging her to continue the communications that of course interested him, and might be useful to him in his future dealings with their maker.

"No place could suit me better. I come when I like and go when it suits me. The place is always ready for me. Mrs. Dade expects me when she sees me, and is not piqued if I stay away six months at a time. I give her no notice that I am coming; and I take my depart-

ure without saying 'I am off.' When I am here, if it is my humour to mope, I lock my oak doors against Mrs. Dade's subordinates, and don't let her or them come near me for days together; and on starting for London I put my hall door-key in my pocket, so that I can at any time let myself into the house without attracting their attention."

"You must startle them sometimes?"

"My fitful goings and comings," was the answer, "used to elicit exclamations of 'Goodness gracious!' and 'Oh, my!' But they have long ceased to be surprised at anything I do. Sometimes I have come down by a night train from London with a bag of provisions in my hand, left the train at Porchester or Cosham, walked over the big ridge by night, entered my house unseen and unheard, and been here for two or three days before letting them know of my arrival."

"And by this time they take all this as mere matter of course."

"Surely! and why not? Whatever we are accustomed to is mere matter of course to us, however much it may be out of the common course to other people. The usual is what one is used to. By this time my people here think it quite natural for their mistress to sneak into her own house by night like a thief, or

leave it noiselessly like a ghost before day-break."

"But there are a few country people—shepherds and other farm-servants, the tattlers of Cosham and Porchester, and gossips (male and female) of the little villages this side of Portsdown—who know a little and imagine a great deal about your proceedings. And to them you must seem a very extraordinary and unaccountable person."

"Years since," said Erica Rapier, still speaking gravely, though her countenance gave signs of her disposition to burst out laughing, "I was their great perplexity and social enigma. There were strange stories about me. I was a rich lady who had run away from a cruel husband. My children—Lady Champion's children" (this again uttered with bitterness that had its intended effect on her listener) "were the children of my cruel husband, from whom I had secretly taken them. Then the children were mine, though I had never been married. At other times I was a harmless lunatic under Dade's care, who from having been my nurse had a salutary influence over me, and could manage me excellently well in my milder moods. Possibly these simple people still think me an oddity and a mystery. But it is more probable that by this time, like old Dade's subordinates, they regard me

as nothing out of the common way. Why not? By this time they are used to me. Anyhow, they have ceased to stare at me and after me when I pass them in the green lanes. And, when they have courage to give me the good day, I return it heartily as I go my way."

"Their curiosity does not impel them to pry about your grounds?"

"They never pestered me in that way!" Erica Rapier answered, with a note of anger in her voice, and a sudden flash of anger from her dark eyes. "If they had been guilty of any such impertinence, my yard-mastiff—an animal with a terrible and by no means undeserved reputation for ferocity—would never have been chained up. No, no, Mr. Cyril Twyford, they never dared to pester me in that way!"

From the tone and look with which these words were spoken, the artist felt he must not throw away caution in conversing with the lady; and the feeling indisposed him for the moment to ply her with more questions.

"And now that I have shown you round my modest demesne," she said, observant of his silence, which she of course referred to the true cause, "you must let me leave you for a short time. I must write some letters for to-night's post. We dine at six. Till then, you must be your own entertainer."

CHAPTER VIII.

FROM SENTIMENT TO SONG.

After the violent excitements of his continental trip, the quick alternations of painful hope and agonizing despair, the heats of forty-two days of drinking, feasting, and gaming, Cyril Twyford enjoyed the milder and comparatively wholesome diversions of his short stay at Fairholt. Relieved by the companionship of one who could be very agreeable to both men and women, and exerted all her powers of pleasing in his favour, the stillness and tranquillity of the place were in no degree depressing to the artist, whose vicious tastes and corrupting pleasures had not extinguished his delight in the beauties of Nature.

Fluttered and flattered by Erica Rapier's way of treating him, he rose betimes in the morning, and left his bed unreluctantly to join her at early breakfast; and, the weather being mild and fine for late autumn, he enjoyed their long walking excursions in the country north of Portsdown. Now resting under a hedge that screened them from the autumnal breeze, they took their picnic luncheon of sandwiches and sherry in the open air; and now pausing to make a hasty sketch of a tree, or quaint old bridge, or rustic

church, they spent hours at a time in the open air, returning to Fairholt in perfect condition to do justice to the dinner, of dainty little dishes and irreproachable wine, that was one factor of Cyril Twyford's satisfaction with each of the days he spent in Hampshire.

But whilst putting him on terms of familiar friendship with herself, and encouraging him to address her with a freedom that would not have been remarkable had they known each other for as many years as the months that had passed since her first visit to his chambers in Fitzroy Square, Miss Rapier did not forbear to exercise in her own behalf the privileges accruing to her from the new-born intimacy that, owing its existence to her pleasure, was fast coming to the fulness of maturity under her fostering care and dexterous management. Evincing a cousin's curiosity in all his experiences and intentions, she sometimes used her cousinly right to ask him questions that she must have known he could not answer without embarrassment. And her favourite time for displaying this natural interest in his private affairs was the hour they spent in gossip over the wine and walnuts after dinner.

"By the way, I have forgotten to congratulate you on your successes at Homburg and Baden," she remarked over the dessert-table on the Thursday evening, a smile of quiet mischief

brightening her saucy little face as she spoke the words in the most cordial of her matter-of-fact tones. "Let me offer you my congratulations now."

"Thank you, you are very good," said the artist uneasily, dropping his eyes to his fruit-plate, and then seeking escape from discomfort in his wine-glass.

"They satisfied your hopes?"

"They were 'so-so.' They were well enough. As to satisfaction, the expectations of the sanguine are insatiable."

"Only 'so-so'? Then you fared badly?"

"I did not say *that*. Things might have gone better."

"Doubtless. But could they have gone worse?" asked the inquisitor, catching her victim's unsteady eye, as she shot the piercing question at him.

"It was not so bad as you seem to imagine," replied Mr. Twyford with growing uneasiness, for he felt more questions were coming, and quailed at the prospect of being compelled to confess how he had squandered every penny of the thousand pounds.

"I knew your luck had been bad when you had been here twenty-four hours without bragging of your good fortune. Gamesters are always garrulous about their winnings, and say never a word of their losings."

"'Tis only a fool who blabs about his misadventures at cards," said Mr. Twyford.

"Or love," put in Miss Rapier quickly.

"Yes, at cards or love, Miss Rapier. The loser at any game of chance had better be silent about his losses. His successes bring him envy, which is sympathy turned inside out. But for defeat a man may not look for pity or any other kind of sympathy."

"So your 'system,' after all, didn't 'work'? It broke down, eh? Systems never do work; they always break down."

"Who told you of my 'system'? How did you hear of it?" ejaculated the artist, flushing from his white cravat to the top of his forehead, and displaying more irritation than he meant to show the lady who, besides being his hostess, was a gentlewoman on whom he had predatory designs;—the gust of ill temper arising from a sudden and groundless suspicion that Miss Rapier had tampered with Marion (Mrs. Twyford), and lured her into betraying his secrets.

"There was no need for anyone to *tell* me that. I am no gambler myself," was the answer, made with perfect coolness and not a sign that the speaker had remarked her companion's warmth, or was aware how cruelly she was teasing him, "but I live enough in the world to meet people who play high, and to hear their

jargon. Was there ever a gamester without a system? One of the novelists, I forget which of them, defines gambling as 'systematic madness.'"

"Only madmen or fools would play at rouge-et-noir unsystematically," said Cyril Twyford sulkily, his irritation subsiding together with his suspicion of his absent confederate's fidelity.

"Moreover, some friends of mine saw you playing at Baden, and they told me it was clear to them you were playing on some ingenious system," added Miss Rapier, to the greater relief of her companion's mind, and the perfect restoration of his confidence in "Mrs. Twyford."

"That's the explanation of the matter, is it?" returned Cyril Twyford, recovering enough of his good temper and self-command to laugh lightly as he added, "For the moment, you staggered me almost to the point of frightening me."

But his spirits fell again when his tormentor, returning to the unpleasant topic, inquired, maliciously,

"And how much worse could things have been?"

"It is difficult to compare the disaster that *has* taken place with the worst that *might have* taken place, and strike the balance between them."

"But your case could not well have been worse."

"I might have blown my brains out with a pistol-bullet."

"Come, make a full confession," said Miss Rapier, nodding her head so as to set the black shock dancing.

"Imagine the worst that could happen, and yet leave me with the means of getting back to London. Take that for my answer, and don't ask for particulars," cried Mr. Twyford, in a voice of entreaty.

"Ay," rejoined the lady, with even livelier malice, as she covered another accurate guess with an affectation of precise knowledge, "but you would have been at your wit's end how to return to Fitzroy Square, if 'the establishment' had not, out of consideration of your losses in past times and your probable losses in the future, lent you money for your hotel bill and return fare."

"And your friends told you that, too, did they? Confound it! How gossip and tattle carry everything about!" exclaimed the artist, turning crimson with the pique of wounded vanity.

"Don't imagine you are smarting from the stings of honest shame. Don't suppose I imagine you have fallen so low as that. It is no such thing!" cried Erica Rapier, mockingly. "You are only writhing and groaning from vexation at thinking how I and my friends laughed over

your misadventure. You'll be comforted when I assure you no friend or enemy of mine told me a word about your Homburg and Baden *escapades.* Let your mind be easy on that point. I have been guessing all the while; and you must allow my guesses show I have a more than creditable knowledge of discreditable life."

"But, if your friends did not make merry with my trouble, *you* are laughing at me!" groaned Cyril.

"Do me the justice of recognizing the candour and openness of my laughter. See, I have no sleeve to laugh under!" retorted Miss Rapier, raising in evidence her shapely right arm, bare from the shoulder-knot of the low evening dress to the bracelet of the tiny wrist. "And now I have learnt all I wished to know I won't worry you any longer.—Laugh at you?" she continued, changing in an instant her tone of mockery for a voice of sympathizing tenderness—a deep, rich, musical voice, strangely eloquent of such compassion as the proudest and most sensitive man could, in a season of adversity, accept with unalloyed gratitude. "Heaven knows my banter has been no affair of my heart! Far from marvelling that you plunge into excitements in order for a few short days to get away from the bitterness of your disappointments, farther still from reproaching you for weakness in flying from

sorrow to dissipation, I could even find it in me to encourage you to repeat the indiscretion that afforded you a brief respite from consuming grief."

But Miss Rapier was too clever a mistress of the arts that control weak men to play long with this vein of strong feeling. Checking the impulses that seemed likely to carry her to warmer and more pathetic utterances, she rose from her seat slowly, looking towards the door, when she had made the brief show of womanly emotion; and, as she passed through the door that Cyril Twyford opened for her in obedience to the unspoken order, she said, in a soft, low, purring tone,

"I shall have recovered myself in twenty minutes, and will sing you a new song when you join me in the drawing-room."

And, true to her promise, this droll, swarthy, little enchantress, rolling her black eyes, and laughing saucily, and tossing her dark shock into a fascinating wildness, enlivened her guest, on his coming to the drawing-room, by assuring him in the richest and gladdest notes of her fine contralto voice that he might do the most terrible things to those same flashing eyes, if ever she tried to rob a poor man of his beer. Written and set to music for the entertainment of farmers at their market-dinners and market-suppers, the "beer-song"—a lyrical protest against a recent

and iniquitous elevation of the malt tax—had caught the humour of the London drawing-rooms at the close of the last London season; and at the time of Cyril Twyford's first visit to Fairholt it was being sung by gentlewomen of the first fashion and nicest refinement who, a few seasons later, did not care to be reminded of the riotous abandonment with which they had trilled forth the barbarous ballad, when it became "the rage" through one of fashion's indecorous freaks. To the artist, who now heard it for the first time, the "beer-song" was so delicious an outrage on the drawing-room proprieties that he encored it once and again, and applauded the singer after the third almost as loudly as he applauded her after the first delivery of the stirring stanzas. The song was all the more diverting to him on account of the piquant contrast of the singer who sung for the poor man's beer and the lady who half an hour earlier was almost moved to tears at the thought of his distresses.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PAINTER'S DAY-DREAM.

On the morrow (Friday), as they were on the point of starting for the last of the country

walks, Miss Rapier and the artist exchanged some words, not speedily forgotten by either of them, near the little gate by which they passed a few minutes later from the garden into the paddocks. Smoking his after-breakfast pipe, he had been there a quarter of an hour when, on the approach of the companion whose pleasure he was attending, Cyril remarked,

"A fancy has possessed me whilst waiting for you with my pipe in my mouth."

"Yes?"

"The strength of my tobacco and the quietude of the place may be held accountable for the sportiveness of my imagination."

"Then it was no unpleasant fancy?"

"I can't say it was altogether agreeable."

"What was it? Tell it to me."

"The notion came over me that I was your prisoner here, and you my gaoler detaining me against my will."

"By necromancy! Likely enough; there is a dash of the witch and wicked enchantress in me!"

"No; by means altogether natural and human. Your captive was held close prisoner by bolted doors and barred windows in one of your upper rooms. No one but you heard my cries for help, for you had shut the double doors of the passages, and my voice could not travel through them

or the brick wall to the servants' quarter. None of them knew or suspected I was there, for you had smuggled me into the strong chamber by night. The food and drink that prolonged my existence was brought to me by you, and given to me through a sliding panel of my door. I could not escape by the window, for it was crossed by strong iron bars. The chimney of the room would have afforded me no egress, even if I could have climbed chimneys like a sweep's boy; for that too was crossed with bars of iron. You gave me no means of diversion in the way of my art. You allowed me no books. By daylight I sat at the barred window, looking into the garden where no human creature was ever visible, athwart the pastures which no human creature ever crossed. Sometimes I discerned a cart or a pedestrian moving slowly onwards at the points of the distant green lane that lay within my view. But the few wayfarers never saw my signs. In a few seconds the carts passed out of sight. Even when they paused to look my way, the distant passers to and fro saw only a white house peeping through the trees;—they could not see the wretched man at the window!"

"When will this sickly day-dream end? Be quick! The sun shines too brightly for this long nightmare. Tales of terror should be told by twilight, or the dying embers of a wood fire,"

said Miss Rapier, looking with her keener and more penetrating eyes into the artist's cold, unsteady organs of vision, as though she would fain read the secrets of his brain, and discover what purpose he had, whether he had any purpose at all, in dwelling thus minutely and tediously on a morbid reverie.

"The end is coming quickly. It came quickly to the captive," continued Cyril Twyford, too pleased with the work of his imagination to allow his story to be shortened by the hearer's impatience. "Hope and courage left me, and then my bodily vigour and my mental powers slipped also from me. As I grew fainter and more feeble, duller in brain and thinner of muscle, I knew that the food and drink given me daily by your hands were poisoned, and that, whilst prolonging my days, they were at the same time pushing me nearer and nearer to death. When you came to me here, and brought me out of my day-dream, I had died; and whilst my body lay lifeless on my prison bed, my spirit, feeling and thinking as the spirits of the dead can feel and think, was aware that you would bury me in a grave dug by your own hands in that copse there at the corner of the garden. There, my story is done," he added, with an unsuccessful attempt at lightness of manner. "In the twilight you spoke of, or by the embers

of a dying fire, this story of a day-dream might frighten you; but in the merry sunshine I need not apologize for scaring you with such queer fancies."

"My nerves, Mr. Twyford, are far too steady and strong to be shaken at any hour or in any light by a clumsy re-dressing of stale horrors picked out of some fourth-rate French novel," replied Miss Rapier contemptuously, and with a momentary light of anger in her countenance. "But I have reason to be anxious for *your* nerves. You have suffered in health, and no wonder, from your troubles and vexations. Put up that pipe;—there, shut the case, and put it in your pocket. I forbid you to smoke again till to-morrow."

"But seriously, seriously, all my fancies might be realized in this secluded place, where you live so completely withdrawn from the world, and fenced in from observation," urged Cyril Twyford, with the manner that was natural to him when his vanity, dashed and nettled by an unexpected rebuff, tried to hide its annoyance.

"Put up that pipe," repeated Miss Rapier imperiously, declining to take any notice of the attempt at self-justification. "Shut the case and put it in your pocket. There, sir, not another pipe or cigar for twenty-four hours! You have been over-smoking yourself. Now, come away

for our walk. Half an hour hence, the sunshine, and the cheery breeze, and the exercise, will have cleared your brain of its fancies, and restored you to sanity."

Aided by the flow of talk, with which she drew her companion into healthier trains of thought, the exercise and the delightful weather justified Miss Rapier's prediction. If they did not make him forgetful of himself, they soon enabled Mr. Cyril Twyford to get the better of his chagrin at the lady's brusque and uncomplimentary reception of his strange fancies.

CHAPTER X.

UNDER DISCIPLINE.

It was not in Mr. Cyril Twyford's power to remain long in the sulky pet that clouded his brow on setting out for his walk with the lady who had "snubbed" him so roughly. The sun itself was only a few degrees brighter than the smiles that played over Miss Rapier's face as she chattered to the artist about her life at the farm-house, and entertained him with comical stories of the adventures that befell her during the long, solitary excursions, in which she had explored the Forest of Bere, and even wandered as far as Waltham Chase.

Passing from subjects suggested by the scenes

through which she led her companion, Erica Rapier gossiped about her early life at Shacklewell, her sister's beauty, her own infantile ugliness and naughtiness, with the freedom of a cousin chatting heedlessly to a cousin on any matter that came uppermost in her mind. Making good fun of the grandeur of her Regent's Park home in the days when Mrs. Doughty Rapier's first "pair of greys" were the pride of the neighbourhood, and her gilded *salons* had lost nothing of their pristine brilliance, the racy *raconteuse* threw her companion into fits of laughter by giving a caricature in words of her own hideous appearance on the occasion of her presentation at Court; and he screamed again and again with riotous glee at the piquant absurdity of her confessions of the mean spites and meaner hopes that stirred her pulses in the distant time, when she used to sit for hours together neglected and wrathful in the corners of ball-rooms, whilst her beautiful sister was dancing in every dance, or was thronged on staircases by young men eager to get her for a waltz. And these confessions were followed up with comical reminiscences of the triumphant delight in which she drove home from the Woolwich Ball that resulted in Mildred's marriage. Of course she forbore to give her companion a complete account of the madness and misery that came to her from mis-

conceptions, having their commencement at that particular ball; but a duller listener than Cyril Twyford would have known how to fill in the gaps of the broken story, and, drawing inferences from sufficiently broad hints, would have seen that the lady's peculiar regard for her brother-in-law dated from a time prior to his first marriage.

Cyril Twyford thought her communicativeness on this delicate topic would be followed immediately by similar communicativeness on a kindred subject that affected his happiness scarcely less than it concerned her felicity; and he would not have been displeased had she, without further delay, afforded him an occasion for speaking on a matter which she had hitherto avoided, even at the moments when she recalled it to his mind by words of delicate suggestion or direct reference. But it was ordained that he should wait yet awhile for the wished-for opportunity.

They had returned from the long ramble in the neighbourhood of Fairholt; they had dressed for dinner, after recovering from the fatigue of the morning's exercise; and they had dined *tête-à-tête*—he in the dress-clothes which despite his Bohemianism he donned unreluctantly, whenever social usage required him to wear them, and she in the same evening costume that became her so well on the previous evening—before Erica, on the withdrawal of the parlour-maid, at length

gratified him by saying, with a faintly sarcastic emphasis on two words of the inquiry,

"Have you seen your Phyllis since her marriage?"

"I have not seen Lady Champion since her marriage," answered the artist, adopting the stately style, though he would have spoken sneeringly of "my Phyllis," had Erica alluded without a sneer to "Lady Champion."

"There was no invitation for you to Queenscote, on your return to your chambers?"

"Lady Champion has not yet offered me any such mark of her regard."

"You cannot have been so unreasonable as to look for such an attention at this early date?"

"Surely not, Miss Rapier. I am far too much alive to the difference between Lady Champion's position and my own humble place in life, to cherish preposterous hopes from her condescending consideration."

"Then there is no need for me to admonish you to order yourself lowly and reverently to a lady who has become one of your 'betters.' I am glad you have taken one of the many wholesome doctrines of the Church catechism to heart, for it is possible the lady will try your Christian humility."

"At present she is visiting and entertaining the great people of her neighbourhood. When she

has rendered them all the proper courtesies, she will do the civil thing to the poor artist she jilted."

"She will ask you to Queenscote for a couple of nights, possibly for a week, in the Christmas holidays. Christmas is a season when great people are wont to be gracious to their poor relations, and to their old friends who have fallen on evil days."

"Should her humanity justify your prediction, Miss Rapier, I shall put my best clothes into my portmanteau, and, hastening to Queenscote, do my duty in that station of life to which—— But you need no further assurance that I was taught the catechism by my godfathers and godmother, and have duly profited by the instruction."

"You have written to her?"

"In compliance with your counsel."

"How often?"

"Three times; and I purpose to write her a fourth letter next Sunday. The better the day the better the deed!"

"She has answered your letters?"

"All three."

"And civilly?"

"Civilly, my dear Miss Rapier? 'Gushingly' is the only word to describe the fervour of the affectionateness that rendered her letters so ineffably soothing and cheering to me!"

"You should not sneer in that way, my dear

friend. Go on sneering at her in that way, and you'll soon begin to hate her. And cousins should live in amity."

"I must sneer or swear, Miss Rapier; and in your presence I would rather do the former."

"Thank you. But don't let my presence restrain you from doing the other thing, if it would be more agreeable to you. I like my guests to be at their ease under my roof. And I rather like hearing men swear, when they swear out roundly, and don't mince their oaths."

"Then you would have liked to hear me vent my rage in monosyllables, while I was reading my 'ever affectionate cousin's' gushing epistles to her 'dear Cyril'!"

"I must see those letters."

"They are very much at your service, and I hope you will enjoy them."

"You have promised to dine with me at Thurlow Lodge on the first Monday after my return to town. Bring the letters in your pocket."

"I will not forget to bring them."

"And in the meantime discipline your temper and cultivate patience. There is no finer virtue than patience for the children of adversity. And for the game we are playing, good temper and patience are needful above all things."

"For what game?"

"The game we are playing, Mr. Twyford, is

called a waiting game. To those who can wait all things are possible."

"What possible good can come of waiting, Miss Rapier?"

"Every conceivable harm would result from precipitancy."

"If I could only see my way to doing anything to the purpose," said Cyril Twyford slowly, and with an air of quiet though vehemently vindictive resoluteness, when he had clenched his right fist into a ball and laid it noiselessly on the dessert-table, at the same time inclining over his wine-glass to his intently watchful companion, "if I could see in the distance any line of action that, taken three, six, nine, any number of years hence, would enable me to make her rue her treatment of me, I could wait patiently till the time came. But I see no course, I cannot conceive one. As I recovered from the first effects of the stunning blow with which she struck me down, I was idiot enough to vow I would punish her. But how," he continued, raising his voice as he hammered the table once and again with his clenched fist, "can I punish her? I say, how can I punish her? By ——! she is so high out of my reach that I might as well try to strike the sun as to strike her. She is a great lady! And I am only a poor devil of a bankrupt painter!"

"Have patience and faith in me," returned Erica Rapier, who with secret satisfaction had been critically observing this creditable show of evil spirit, and coming to an opinion that, despite its weakness and the baseness of its metal, the tool with which she meant to strike Phyllis would, with careful grinding and adroit usage, be sufficient for her purpose. "Have patience; and have faith in me, when I tell you there are forces at work that will give you your revenge; forces that will bring her to the dust—ay, wringing her hands, and begging for forgiveness and mercy at your feet. She shall fall as low as that; and then you may turn away from her or spurn her!"

"But what forces can work such a miracle?" asked Cyril Twyford of the woman to whose superior force of will and finer wickedness his feeble nature was yielding itself more and more completely and irrevocably.

"I cannot tell them all. I do not profess to know all of them. But be assured," was the answer, "that, if you will only have patience and enough faith in me to act as I bid you, love will do much, and love turned to hate will do even more."

"Whose love?—whose love turned to hate?" the artist asked quickly, hanging on the dark eyes of the woman to whom he put the questions.

Instead of answering these eager inquiries directly, Erica Rapier, resting her right elbow on the table, and raising her right hand, observed,

"Listen to me. Though he looks barely ten years her senior he is twice her age. His looks may withdraw the world's attention from the fact, but he will remember it oftener than she imagines. However youthful he may be in face, figure, spirit, temper, air, a man twice as old as his wife never forgets that she is half his age. The discrepancy of their years may in some respects give him the advantage over her, by endowing him with tact and discretion to humour her caprices, and by disposing her to honour and obey him. But he never sees the matter in this light. Whether things go smoothly or roughly, he is keenly sensitive of his age, and instead of rejoicing over it as a source of strength, regrets it as a source of weakness in all his relations to her. If he cannot rise to her light and joyous moods, when her gladness runs forth in song and laughter, he is reproached by her girlish merriment and thinks sadly, 'I, in the yellow sere, am no fit mate for that blithesome bird of the sunny spring, warbling and caroling there all the day from exuberance of happiness.' When she is pettish and tearful, he says in his heart, 'If I were younger, I should be quicker to sympathize with her, and avoid the

slips that bring clouds to her brow.' Sooner or later little differences arise between them, the trivial disputes that only quicken the mutual affection of young lovers; and every contention, whether he retires from it beaten or victorious, makes him say to himself, 'She rebels against me because I am growing old; if we were in the same term of life, we should have only one will.' It does not escape him how little she affects the society of men of his age, and with what ease and innocent gaiety she speaks with men who are half his years. His temper is irritated by the smiles that pass from her eyes, by the persiflage that flows from her ruddy lips to her boyish partners of the ball-room. If he sees her make or acknowledge the first overtures for a flirtation, if he suspects her of such wickedness, he frets and fumes with jealousy. And when jealousy has set in, Mr. Twyford, love is already turning to hate."

"He is of that sort, is he?" inquired the artist quickly, when Erica Rapier paused for breath as well as rhetorical effect.

"Why should he be exempt from the universal weakness of his sex?" retorted Miss Rapier. "All men are by nature prone to jealousy. And he is a man."

"But no common man—at least, you have taught me to think so. And, indeed, without

your evidence to character, I should have known him to be an uncommon man. He is so unlike the kind of men I have lived with that I am not the person to judge him. But I feel a man's strength, even though I can't fully understand and appreciate it. And he is too strong a man to be made a plaything of."

"No measure of strength," was the answer, "exempts a man from ludicrous weakness in the hands of women. Think of the men who are meek to scolding wives, fetch and carry for capricious mistresses, and rave about the simplicity of artful minxes who flirt with their dupes' rivals under their very dupes' eyes. Are these toys of petticoated schemers remarkable only for weakness? Does not one hear it said of each of them by turns, 'How can a man of his good sense and overbearing spirit be such a fool in the hands of *such* a woman?' The man who brooks no opposition from masculine competitors is just the man to idolize a silly termagant and do every foolish thing she bids him. His weakness towards the gentler sex—Heaven bless them for their gentleness!—is in proportion to his strength and unyielding hardness towards men. It was so in heroic Greece and ancient Rome; and it is so in this precious nineteenth century. Agamemnon was Clytemnestra's victim, Marc Anthony was Cleopatra's play-

thing, and Nelson in his grandest period was the puppet of a painter's model. Bide your time, no very long time, and you shall see my king of men is not exempt from the infirmities of his lordly kind. His very passion for Phyllis—the fanciful circumstances from which it arose, the absurd conditions under which it triumphed—should satisfy you he is capable of all the usual extravagances and imbecilities of vehement affection. With all his strength, he is human—and he shall live to be insanely jealous of you!"

"Of me?"

"Surely," cried Erica Rapier, taking her elbow from the table, and waving her little hand as she stayed in her speech to utter a short, light, bitter laugh, "of *you*, and no other man! I don't want him to be jealous of anyone else; and at least in this one thing I will have my will. Jealousy of any other man might not kill his love of your cousin; it might even quicken it for a time. But his jealousy of you shall turn that love to hate quickly, and for ever."

"And how am I to make him jealous?"

"Through your cousin's love of you," was the answer. "Wait for the opportunities that are sure to come sooner or later, seize and use them when they have come as I shall instruct you, and, by playing on that love, kindle in his breast a fire that shall consume his tenderness for her,

and give you your best revenge—for *his* triumph *over* you, and *her* faithlessness *to* you. Imagine his fury at seeing her affection revert from himself to you. And when you have separated him from her, and recovered her to yourself"—she paused for half a minute, looking at him the while with a look that acted like a cordial on the brain it cleared and quickened and steadied, before she added slowly, in a lower tone, "it will remain for you to accept and satisfy her love, or—to slight it."

"But—but," urged Cyril Twyford, with the feeble hesitancy of incredulousness seeking extinction—a faint, entreating air, which showed that the poison, working in his feeble brain, had not yet accomplished all of its appointed task, "though it may still linger there—mind me, I don't say you are wrong—but, but, my dear Miss Rapier, you must see that, if it is not quite dead, her old love of me must have very little life left in it. Don't you see, eh? Don't you see what I mean, you see?"

"I see that for the moment it was weaker than ambition," returned Erica Rapier, aiding the poison's action and quickening it with another dose of flattery. "I see also that, weakened by ambition, it has yielded to the sentiment with which a man of Arthur Champion's endowment could scarcely fail to inspire any woman he was

bent on winning. But to be debilitated and obscured is not to have perished. A plant may languish and be hidden by another plant of newer and larger growth, and retain its vitality; it may be quite unseen, and yet a living, ay, and a growing, force. It is so with your cousin's old love of you. Covered, and for the moment put clean out of sight, it lives."

"Do you really think so?" said the artist, in a fuller and firmer tone which, whilst asking for more poison, satisfied Miss Rapier he needed no more of it for her purpose.

"I know it is there," she answered, boldly.

"Do you?—do you indeed know it? She can't have been such a simpleton as to tell you so."

"Tell me so? No, indeed," was the reply. "She is scarcely fool enough to make such a confession in words. She is a gentlewoman, and she isn't brainless. But under nice management a woman will sometimes reveal a secret without *telling* it. Don't ask me how I know, how I discovered she still cherishes something of her old love for you. 'Tis enough for you to be assured of the fact."

"And I am assured of it. By heavens, I am certain of it!" Cyril Twyford ejaculated stoutly.

"How could it be otherwise?" said Erica Rapier, hammering away at the nail she had already driven clean home. "She loved you

when, in the fullness and brightest season of all your personal attractions, you were a very god to her. You were her first love even as you will be her last. Believe a woman who knows a little of human nature when she tells you that a woman of sensitive temper never does really survive her tenderness for the man she loved in her guileless girlhood with all the fervour and terrible thoroughness of a girl's first passion. And then, think of yourself. I am no flatterer; I am not given to make smooth speeches; *you* know how harshly truthful I can be at times. Look for no compliments from me. But think of yourself as you still are after years of dissipation, with figure, face, presence that even yet command the admiration of women; then recall yourself as you were ere time had given you a single white hair, or disappointment set a single line on your brow; remember all you were at your best, and say if you think it possible any young, pure, enthusiastic girl could have loved you when you were five and twenty or eight and twenty, and be in her inmost heart indifferent to you now."

Pains have been taken in vain to make Cyril Twyford well-known to the readers of these pages, if they have credited him with delicacy to be offended by such adulation, or with perception to detect its insincerity, or with chivalric gener-

osity to recoil from the suggestion—say, rather, from the bold, broad, unqualified statement—that Phyllis Lovelock gave herself to Arthur Champion while she still loved another man, and that in course of time her old love for the artist would revive and blossom into sinful passion, to her husband's despair and her own nauseous infamy. Miss Rapier knew her man thoroughly. If she laid on the colours coarsely, she did so in the reasonable confidence that her picture would be none too glaring for the eyes they were intended to delight. If her flattery was gross, it may be pleaded in her behalf that she knew the palate and the greed she was feeding.

"I see land, I see land in the distance," ejaculated Cyril Twyford, rising from his chair, and in his excitement pacing up and down the dining-room, whilst Miss Rapier retained her seat. "There's land in the distance, and I see it. And yet," he continued, still walking to and fro, "I should never have seen it if you had not pointed it out to me. In every man there is at bottom a measure of modesty and diffidence and bashfulness that few people suspect. I was blinded to my power by my old boyish modesty and diffidence. But you have opened my eyes, Miss Rapier, and opened a new future to me. I see land, I see land in the distance."

"You see land, you paltry simpleton!" thought

the lady, as her guest raced to and fro over the dining-room carpet in this wildly absurd fashion. "*You* see land, you base, pilfering sneak and cheat! All the land you know about or will ever know is the bit of ground under your feet, the narrow ridge of land on which you walk unsteadily, with the devil behind you, and before you—the deep sea of perdition."

But she forbore to put these thoughts in language; and Mr. Cyril Twyford knew nothing about them, though something of them would surely have pierced the thick crust of his egotism and vexed the little vicious soul within it, had he regarded the smile of disdainful amusement that brightened Erica Rapier's face, and, broadening as it grew brighter, became even more eloquent of aversion than of ridicule, before she brought him up sharply by saying,

"As you have left the table, it is clear you think it is time for me to leave the room. For the present we have said enough on this matter. Don't come to the drawing-room till you can behave like a rational and comparatively sober man." But, that this rebuke might not put her startled dupe too much out of conceit with himself, she threw him a re-assuring smile as she swept through the opened door, adding, "If you behave properly when you join me, I will sing you another new song."

Twenty minutes later Mr. Cyril Twyford went to the drawing-room with a hope that Erica Rapier would re-open the conversation which had just given him so cheering a view of land in the distance; but instead of satisfying the natural desire she only gave a cup of tea, and two or three songs before bidding him good night.

Nor did she revert to the interesting topic on the following (Saturday) morning, though they spent a full hour together in the garden, between breakfast and the appearance of the pony-phaeton in which the old groom-gardener drove the gentleman from Fairholt to the Portsmouth station for the train that carried the visitor back to London.

"And now that you have been to my farmhouse, you will come to it often. Whether I am here or elsewhere, you will be welcome to Fairholt, whenever you need retirement and country air," said the lady, kissing the tips of her fingers, and waving her right hand repeatedly as the carriage passed from the door to the garden-gate.

Having dismissed her guest thus cordially, Erica Rapier spent another hour walking in the paddocks and reviewing all that had passed between herself and her guest for the inside of a week. "No," ran her thoughts, as she retraced her steps in the direction of the farmhouse, "there was no *arrière pensée* to that long stupid

rigmarole of a day-dream. I looked him through and through without seeing a sign of purpose. It was pure coincidence that his sickly fancies had points of resemblance to my clear steady purpose. But he was right in saying how fearfully I could use the power given me by this solitude, and my way of enjoying it. There will, however, be no need for me to keep my prisoner for months, or even weeks. Twenty-four or forty-eight hours will be long enough. Of that, however, not a word to Mr. Cyril Twyford at present. Even he, mean though the wretch is, might fail me from some lingering force of honest sentiment if I took him into my confidence at this early date. His *honour*—ay, his honour—might prove an insurmountable obstacle. Or he might betray me to my enemy for a price. He is as paltry a knave as can be found in all London; but I must educate him into deeper villainy before I can use him safely as I mean to use him."

CHAPTER XI.

INVITATIONS TO QUEENSCOTE.

Cyril Twyford did not forget to put his cousin's letters in his pocket when he went to dine at Thurlow Lodge on the first Monday after Miss Rapier's return from Hampshire to Regent's Park.

By that time he had received a fourth letter from Lady Champion, a brief note, overflowing with cordiality, that invited him to Queenscote for Christmas day and the ensuing fortnight, when there would be skating should the winter be early and sharp, or hunting with the west Somerset fox-hounds should the weather favour the sport. And having handed the letters to Miss Rapier, after filling her glass with some of the late Mr. Doughty Rapier's port, the painter resumed his seat, and, crossing his legs, gave his mind to the generous drink, whilst his hostess read the epistles.

"Four of them, endorsed with date and the writer's name, and marked respectively 1. 2. 3. 4. How business-like it all looks!" said Miss Rapier, glancing at the superscriptions and endorsements before she opened the envelopes. "You are quite right to mark them carefully, for when they number a hundred the care may save us trouble."

Having perused the letters, whilst the painter sipped his wine in silence even to the middle of a third glass, Miss Rapier put the envelopes together, and, tying them again into a packet, returned them to Phyllis Champion's cousin.

"A very good beginning," she remarked, when Cyril Twyford had restored the letters to a pocket of his dress-coat. "You won't need

much help from me in that department of our enterprise. But let me see her letters as they come to you. I may give you a useful hint now and then. Of course you have accepted the invitation?"

"In my prettiest style."

"That's well. We shall enjoy the visit in a certain way."

"You going too?"

"Have I not the honour to be one of the family—*your* family, Mr. Twyford? Lady Champion could hardly leave me out when she is making up a Christmas party. If I am not a poor relation, I am an unfortunate one. Poverty is not the only distress she can compassionate. Moreover, she is tired by this time of having Beatrice on her hands, and makes a fit occasion for putting the child on me again."

"You also have letters from Lady Champion?"

"They come to me at the rate of one a fortnight; and of course I give her no reason to think me a bad correspondent. We are sisters, drawn together by sympathy, confidence, mutual affection, to say nothing of our common devotion to her husband. How fortunate she is! Her beauty, station, rank, social influence of themselves make her enviable. But in addition to them she has me, you, and Arthur. With

such a husband, such a cousin, and such a sister she cannot fail to be supremely happy, so long as we three love and cherish her."

"I saw Phyllis last week—on Thursday," said Cyril Twyford, watching his companion's face to see how she took a piece of news with which he hoped to surprise her.

"Saw her? Where?" cried Erica Rapier.

"'Tis clear you have not heard from Lady Champion in the last few days."

"My fortnightly letter is not due till to-morrow. So the latest news from Queenscote has not come to me yet. But where did you see her?"

"By the merest accident in Waterloo Place; she was in an open carriage by herself, and picking me up, she took me to a house at the south-east corner of St. James's Park, and then to the city—to Lombard Street, where we met Sir Arthur Champion."

"In London without my knowledge!" ejaculated Miss Rapier, her brow clouding with ill-humour.

"It was quite a flying visit, taken at a sudden impulse and without forethought. They were in town only for two nights at Claridge's Hotel, and were running back to Somerset by the afternoon express within two hours of my meeting Phyllis."

"For two nights at an hotel instead of coming

here!" said the mistress of Thurlow Lodge, with signs of deepening displeasure.

"I said so."

"Why didn't they come here?"

"Because they preferred going to an hotel. On that point I am certain. For when I put the very same question they told me so."

"What made them come up to town?"

"Business—only business. And in order to save time and get back to Queenscote as quickly as possible, they went to Claridge's instead of coming here."

"As you are in their confidence, you can perhaps say what the business was."

"Business with lawyers and bankers, with upholsterers and house-decorators. Their principal business was to look at a house they have taken in St. James's Park, and see what the workmen were doing for its repair and renovation."

"When did they take the house?"

"Three weeks or a month since. From what I saw of the house last Thursday, the workmen must have been at it for at least three weeks. And Sir Arthur and Lady Champion will be lucky if they see the fellows leave it within three months from the present time."

"A great deal to be done, eh?"

"A great deal, and they are bent on doing it

well. Dance and Wheelright are the decorators, and the furnishing will be done by Dobson and Moody."

"A great house, is it?"

"Fairly large—big enough for pomp, and small enough for comfort. The entrance-hall is all it should be, and the reception-rooms might belong to a house twice the size," answered Cyril Twyford, chuckling secretly over Miss Rapier's annoyance.

To his credit, or the reverse, it should, however, be remarked that Cyril Twyford was actuated by policy rather than spite in aggravating Miss Rapier's dissatisfaction at the intelligence he poured upon her. Just as Erica Rapier thought to strengthen her power over the artist by stimulating his resentment against Phyllis, he meant to gain greater influence over the mistress of Thurlow Lodge by playing on her discontent till it should result in fierce hostility to her brother-in-law. Too vain a creature not to have inferred from her complaisances that she regarded him with an approval likely to develop into the most tender interest, Cyril Twyford was already nursing designs on Miss Rapier's person and possessions, and thinking that, after meting out chastisement to Phyllis, he could console himself for the loss of her beauty and twelve thousand pounds by marrying a gentlewoman of riper age

and four times that amount of money. To readers, remembering the particulars of Miss Rapier's intercourse with the painter, it can scarcely occasion astonishment that he had conceived an ambition he could not hope to realize, without first illustrating one of her principal doctrines by measures that should convert her strong love of Sir Arthur Champion into even stronger hatred of him. Under all the circumstances of their curiously similar cases, it would have been strange if Cyril Twyford had not formed a scheme for Miss Rapier's management having one or two points of resemblance to the lady's scheme for managing him;—if her plot upon him had not stirred him to make a counterplot upon her.

"Surely you heard something of this before?" said Cyril Twyford. "Phyllis must have said something of the house in St. James's Park?"

"You have given me the news for the first time."

"Possibly they wished to keep the matter for a surprise to us in the Christmas holidays, and would have held the secret longer had it not been for my accidental meeting with my cousin."

"That is probable."

"But it is unlike Phyllis. To do the devil justice, she is not given to nursing secrets and making mysteries out of nothing."

"There is no reason why she should write to me by the first post that she has hired a house or ordered a new dress. I have no title to her confidence. I should not telegraph to her that I had bought a new garden-roller."

"True and fair to her. 'Tis reasonable you should be more struck by Sir Arthur Champion's reserve," said Cyril Twyford, playing his petty game with almost feminine cleverness.

"My words were meant to apply to Arthur Champion as much as to his wife. Why should *his* reserve be more remarkable than *her* silence?"

"Because he has lived with you on terms of such peculiar intimacy. A few months since he told you everything; now he makes a London home for himself without giving you a hint. 'Pon my honour, I do think you have reason to feel aggrieved."

"'Pon my honour," cried the lady, with a startling show of heat, "Sir Arthur Champion must be guilty of a grave offence against good taste and feeling if you can see it. But you are so bright an example of fireside virtue, Mr. Twyford, that I ought not to wonder at your disapproval of my brother-in-law's behaviour."

"As that prick touched her so sharply," thought Cyril, "I will give another dig with the spur."

"Depend upon it, they'll give good reasons

for their silence, and tell all about their new house at the proper time," cried Erica cheerily, holding back the temper which threatened to get the better of her discretion. After a pause, she added—"Anyhow, they have chosen a good quarter."

"A most convenient one for a Member of Parliament," said the artist.

"And within a stone's throw of Whitehall Place," added Miss Rapier.

"That's no consideration to him," remarked Mr. Twyford, giving his victim another taste of sharp steel, "now that he has thrown up his Whitehall Place appointment."

"What? Resigned the Indian secretaryship?"

"Just so! Hasn't he told you of that? How strange of him!"

"I don't believe it," cried the lady, in lively excitement.

"I believe it."

"Why?"

"Because he told me so. 'Tis no wonder he has thrown up the appointment, now that he is too rich to need the salary, and too full of new diversions to need the employment. He wishes to live chiefly in the country, and be quit of duties that would lessen the number of his hours in my gentle cousin's society. No wonder he has resigned the place. But 'tis deuced

strange of him to resign without telling you."

The increasing brightness of Erica Rapier's eyes troubled the artist, whose gaze always fell before those dark orbs when they flashed angrily. But though he could not scrutinize them with point-blank fearlessness, he blinked askant at them from the corners of his own weaker organs of vision, to see if they shed tears. His expectation, however, was disappointed; for the rising tears returned to their source. But for this disappointment Cyril had abundant compensation in the visible anguish of jealousy that whitened Miss Rapier's little brown face, and checked her breathing for a few seconds before she said, in a harsh, hard, rattling, and yet low voice,

"Now you see how completely your dear cousin Phyllis has taken my brother from me. He comes to London—not here, to his old home, but to the hotel. They come to London and leave it, without paying me a visit. Without saying a word to me, he makes a new London home for himself—not where he could be my neighbour, but in a distant quarter. He throws up his office without consulting me, or telling me what he has done. Have I your permission, sir, to hate your dear cousin Phyllis?"

"You may hate her as much as you please!" said Mr. Cyril Twyford generously. "I give you free leave. Hate her with your whole soul,

Miss Rapier, and you won't hate her as much as I do."

A minute later Miss Rapier was so far mistress of herself as to say, almost in her usual voice,

"Give me another glass of wine," and, when she had drunk the full glass to its last drop, she said cheerily, "I am well now, and shan't make a fool of myself again. Now talk away on the same subject. I must know more about Lady Champion."

"She has commissioned me for a crayon sketch of Beatrice, some such a thing as my sketch of Jessie Armitage. I had twenty guineas for that. But Lady Champion means to pay me fifty."

"Are you to do it at once?"

"In time for a present to Sir Arthur on his next birthday—the 4th of March."

"Capital!" cried Miss Rapier gleefully. "He dislikes notice taken of his birthday. One of his foibles is sensitiveness about his age. His young wife could not do a thing more certain to annoy him. She could not give him a more irritating birthday present than his child's portrait—to remind him how soon he may be a grandfather. Mind you make the child look her full age."

"I'll see to that, Miss Rapier. She shall look sixteen."

"Excellent!" said Miss Rapier, shaking her black tresses, and laughing with unaffected glee.

"That birthday gift will open the young wife's eyes to her husband's foolish weakness."

Passing from this pleasant subject to no less congenial matters, Erica Rapier went from them to the artist's scarcely cheerful home in Fitzroy Square.

"And how," she added, "do you like your dingy studio and dingier chambers now you have got back to them?"

"They never pleased me less," was the answer. "But I must make the best of them."

"Of course you must, as you are too poor to leave them."

"And almost too poor to live in them."

"How differently you would be placed now, if things had gone as I wished them! How very differently!" said Miss Rapier, with scorching sympathy. "You would be master of a pleasant house at Kensington, with Phyllis for your wife, a thousand a year from invested money, and a thousand pounds at your bankers. What a change! You have lost Phyllis's twelve thousand pounds, a great deal of money to a poor man. You have lost the money I should have given you. You have lost Phyllis, and—— By the way, of course that person we 'hardly ever mention' is with you still?"

"I never asked you to avoid the mention of her," said Mr. Twyford sullenly. "In her way

she is a good enough woman. Be silent about her if you like, Miss Rapier; but if you speak of her, you might do it less insultingly."

"I don't like to talk or think of her as Mrs. Twyford. I feel insulting you, when I give her that name. What is her real name?"

"Marion."

"And her surname?"

"Hope."

"Marion Hope! I like the name. Marion is one of my favourite Christian names, and Hope is a good name. How did she get so good a name?"

"From her father—who was a very bad tailor."

"'Tis well you did not throw her off prematurely."

"I have no intention of parting with her, unless *you* wish me to do so," said Cyril Twyford, wondering what had put Marion Hope into Miss Rapier's mind, and what object she could have in speaking of the woman so seldom mentioned.

"I have no wish you should put her away," answered the lady, and then, seeing a curious, unaccountable look of disappointment come over her companion's face, she added, "at least, no such wish at present. I may give you other advice by-and-by. But, for the present, retain her."

"Why?"

"So long as she remains with you, she is a power that may be serviceable to us."

"I don't understand you."

"But," returned Miss Erica Rapier, "you will understand me one of these days. Anyhow, my counsel is not given lightly when I tell you not to let her slip out of your hands till you are sure you can do without her. I will go even further, and tell you to keep her bound to you till *we both* are sure we can do without her. There," she continued, with a sudden change of voice, "enough of that subject; not another word on it; and now, before you go (you must go now, for I have an engagement for a party) let us cousins arrange to travel from London to Somerset together. We should go by an early train, so as to avoid the Christmas Eve holiday-makers, and get to Queenscote in good time to dress for dinner. Will you be my escort?"

"With the greatest pleasure."

"Thanks. You may leave it to me to choose the train, and I will not fail to let you know the time for our meeting at the Paddington Station."

"It is yours to order, Miss Rapier—mine to obey."

"You see, it will have such a good effect at Queenscote for us to travel together," remarked Miss Rapier, with a comical grimace. "It will

seem so Christmassy and cousin-like for us to go hand-in-hand together. Arthur will like you for taking so kindly to me. And Phyllis will think so well of me for taking so kindly to you. I shall make great running into Phyllis's good graces by my beautiful demeanour to her cousin. There shall be peace and good-will amongst us all; and if, in my cousinly fervour, I call you 'Cyril,' you mayn't look the least bit surprised."

CHAPTER XII.

SEMBLANCE AND FACT.

THINGS are not always what they seem; and to the end of human time there will be wrangling over the question whether appearances are, upon the whole, better or worse than the facts underlying them. But as he is neither cynic nor "gusher," the historian may be permitted to avoid the barren controversy, whilst recording that the Christmas party at Queenscote was not exactly what it seemed. Judging from appearances, one would have declared it a joyous assemblage of gentle folk cherishing the friendliest feelings for one another. What it was, the reader knows.

The gathering could scarcely have been more successful had Maud Tournament mustered cour-

age to come to it from her Ryde villa, bringing Evelina Brook with her. For, whilst Erica Rapier wore her sunniest looks, and Cyril Twyford overflowed with affection he did not feel, Sir Arthur and Lady Champion had gracious words and thoughts for all their staying guests, who comprised three or four old Anglo-Indians from Bath, and as many people from London who made the journey from Paddington to the west country in the same train with Miss Rapier and her escort.

The visitors sleeping in the house were of themselves a goodly company; but they were daily outnumbered by the people who drove over to Queenscote for luncheon, or dinner, or dance from houses of the district. The goodness of a neighbourhood depends mainly on the number of its good neighbours. And, whilst Queenscote was happily placed in a region populous with agreeable families, Sir Arthur Champion, from his personal eminence and ancestral influence, had a position in his native county that put him on the easiest footing with its territorial personages. Sufficiently rich and distinguished to live on sociable terms with mightiest and "feudalest" leaders of the county, he was not weighted with enough power and grandeur to overawe modest squires whose rent-rolls gave them no place among "the great landowners of

the realm." And with all these minor gentry of his neighbourhood—gentry enviable for their sufficient means, and stainless pedigrees, and pleasant manners,—Sir Arthur Champion had the kindliest relations. Moreover, West Somerset "society," within twelve miles of Queenscote, had reason to congratulate itself on the quality and accomplishments of its principal clergy. Not that these divines were the brightest examples of learning saintly zeal. Some of them were better bred than read, and knew less of theology than the turf. But, hitting the happy mean between worldliness and austerity, they had the merit of freedom from fanaticism, and were commendable for the benevolence that made them beloved by the humbler people of a district, where a rector might take out a shooting licence without incurring an imputation of licentiousness, and even figure bravely in the hunting-field without scandalizing his weaker brethren.

In these days of free thought and fearless inquiry, one hesitates to account it for virtue to Lady Champion that, in the earlier years of her married life, she greatly affected the society of the graver and less self-indulgent of these Somerset ecclesiastics. But it must be admitted she was a significantly frequent caller at some of the neighbouring rectories, and seldom gave a dinner without inviting a clergyman to it. For though

she was not of a clerical family, and her husband's orthodoxy was not above suspicion, Phyllis nursed a womanly preference of clergymen over all other kinds of men, and held with equal firmness and gentleness several antiquated notions respecting the privileges and virtues of the national priesthood. To this day one of her liveliest regrets is for the divisions of general opinion on spiritual questions; and, if she could have her pleasure in human affairs, all men would come quickly to think alike, without requiring any concessions from his Grace of Canterbury or a single modification of the thirty-nine articles.

Brought at Queenscote into society greatly superior in rank and refinement to any circles that had of late seen much of him, it can be imagined Cyril Twyford enjoyed the Christmas holidays, notwithstanding his resentment of his cousin's exaltation and perfidy. It tickled his snobbish vanity to be staying in a great county house, where he was rated as "one of the family," and at times heard himself whispered about as "Lady Champion's cousin." And other circumstances helped to cover the deep-seated jealousy and spite of his grudging heart with superficial good-humour. Though he might as well have left his skates in Fitzroy Square, he had several occasions for displaying the pink coat

and breeches he brought with him to Somerset. From the old time at Oxford, where he took second-class honours with "the drag" and in steeplechases, Mr. Twyford had been somewhat of a hunting-man; and it was cordially admitted by the members of the West Somerset hunt that Lady Champion's cousin showed no ordinary address and pluck in riding to hounds on the big-boned, ugly-tempered chestnut out of the Queenscote stables. And, whilst winning applause for his management of an animal that had unseated many a hard and clever rider, the artist earned the praise of gentler critics by the spirit with which he waltzed at the New Year's ball at Queenscote, and at other dances of the neighbourhood to which he came with Lady Champion's contingent.

At the same time, with proper care for his professional interests, he availed himself of the opportunities afforded him for taking Beatrice's portrait in crayon; and Phyllis was so delighted with the result of the clandestine "sittings" in her own particular morning-room that in a tone of entreaty, as though her ruddy lips were asking a prodigious favour, she begged her cousin to make a sketch of Archie also, so that Arthur's birthday present might be a gift of two pictures instead of one. And when the slight sketches were done, to the lively pleasure of the boy and

girl, who vastly enjoyed being taken into their new mamma's confidence on so interesting a matter, it would have touched a cynic's heart to hear how joyfully and tenderly Phyllis said to her artist-cousin, "These sketches are *so* good, Cyril, they cannot fail to bring you scores of commissions!" The affectionate creature was thinking how far she could honourably use her influence to get the commissions, and how delightful it would be to fill her cousin's pocket with gold, that he could take with pride and no single feeling of humiliation. And, whilst her heart and brain were busy with these thoughts, the graceless fellow, smiling abundantly the while, was saying to himself,

"Confound her for her impudent patronage! This is her *compensation* to the poor devil she has jilted and ruined!"

Another thing that contributed to the artist's contentment and enabled him to endure his cousin's insolent patronage with a show of equanimity, was the manifest favour accorded him by the perfidious woman's husband. Of course Arthur Champion noticed the signs of hard living in the painter's thin, pale face. But these indications of Cyril Twyford's habits did not repel the baronet, who was no severe censor of any man's morals, and had learnt from experience that men may be their own enemies with-

out failing in loyalty to their comrades. On the other hand, several circumstances disposed him to like the painter of "The Rose without a Thorn." An art-amateur of no ordinary power, he had an amateur's respect for professional artists; and the time passed quickly and pleasantly that he spent with the painter in the smoke-room, chatting about studios and their productions. And whilst he observed with approval Cyril Twyford's address at the billiard-table and in the drawing-room, Arthur Champion was gratified by what he beheld and heard of Cyril's equestrian performances. Naturally the master of Queenscote saw with satisfaction that in manner, appearance, and accomplishments his wife's cousin would do her no discredit in society. But his chief reasons for regarding Mr. Twyford so favourably were that he was Phyllis's only near cousin, that she liked him, and that with nice tact and no little generous emotion she had asked her husband to think well of him and even to cherish him. Phyllis's affection for her cousin was a sufficient guarantee to her husband that, though possibly something of a Bohemian in the background, the painter was in the main a gentleman and at heart a good fellow.

Sir Arthur Champion's kindly regard for his wife's cousin would, however, have perished almost at its birth, had he overheard the talk that

passed between the artist and Miss Rapier as they travelled in the same carriage of an extra-fast express train from Bath to Paddington. Had the gentle pastor of St. Augustine's Church overheard the same conversation, he would have learnt to his grief and dismay how greatly he was mistaken in thinking the wicked would lose their wickedness on coming within the range of Lady Champion's virtuous influence. To his horror he would have discovered that the lady, whose domestic happiness seemed so secure, and whose sweetness of face, voice, temper might well be deemed her sure defence against human malignity, had in the circle of her closest associates two fiercely resentful and conspiring enemies—sufficiently crafty and powerful and evil to blast the peace of half a hundred homes.

CHAPTER XIII.

PHYLLIS AND FASHION.

It being in the nature of attractive people to draw within their influence persons who attract, and of charming people to surround themselves with those who charm, there is no ground for wonder that, being both attractive and charming, Lady Champion had not been many weeks in St. James's Park before her house became a favourite haunt of Fashion.

Fortunate in attaining such eminence in so short a time, Phyllis was even more singular in attaining it without an effort or any desire to rise so high. Instead of seeking to be famous, she only accommodated herself to the fame she could not escape, but would gladly have avoided; and her elevation having been wrought by other people without reference to her wishes, she determined to think as little as possible of what they had done for her, from motives not altogether devoid of selfishness.

As the wife of Sir Arthur Champion—a well-descended baronet, with power and homage in his ancestral county; a Member of Parliament, with a sure seat and the confidence of political leaders; a man of society, with reputation in the clubs, influence in official circles, a place amongst men of letters, the *éclat* of public services, and an estate that could have maintained a peerage with dignity—Phyllis would in the ordinary course of things have seen enough of London grandeur to satisfy and even for a moment to dazzle a young gentlewoman of her small worldly experience, simple tastes, and unambitious spirit. And on coming to St. James's Park on the opening of the Parliamentary Session she had neither hope nor thought of taking any position but the one that pertained as a matter of course to Lady Champion of Queenscote. There were moments

when she would have been thankful had this station been less splendid and imposing. For with all her quiet dignity Phyllis was not without a secret and girlish diffidence, natural to the young woman who had so recently left a quiet home in a small provincial town, though unbefitting a lady with a grand country seat, a mansion within ten minutes' walk of Buckingham Palace, and an income of more than £10,000 a year.

On surveying the drawing-rooms, which Cyril declared sufficient for a much larger house, she was more content with the taste and skill of her decorators and upholsterers, than certain of her ability to hold the elegant salons well in hand, when they should be thronged with the multitude of Arthur's London friends, together with the men and women of their Somerset connection. How should she conciliate these people? How should she justify Arthur's choice of a wife, to the brilliant parliamentary debaters, the famous Indian soldiers and administrators, the eloquent advocates and learned lawyers, the men of letters and wit, the poets and artists, whose acquaintance she both wished and feared to make? What should she do with these clever, fastidious, critical folk? It would not, she thought (quite wrongly), be enough for her to give each of them a hand and a smile. She must say things to

show that, if unable to rate them at their proper worth, she was sensible of their various high merits, and that Arthur had not invited ridicule by worshiping a simpleton. But then it would be sheer presumption in her to think of entertaining those who entertained the whole world. Whilst such thoughts could flutter her breast and give it uneasiness, how could Lady Champion wish for dignity and influence in addition to the burden of honour that had come to her through the wedding-ring?

But it was decreed by the fates, who are still held accountable for the turns taken by human affairs in romantic literature, that together with the position, for which she was indebted to her husband, Lady Champion should have homage and influence by virtue of her own native endowments. It was not enough for the fates that she should be a great lady in the fourth or fifth grade of conventional greatness. Nothing would satisfy the mystic sisters but that this simple, artless Phyllis should be a woman of fashion. And Phyllis's change, from the beauty of a small country town to a lady of title and power, was not accomplished more easily and quickly than her preferment from mere respectability and worthiness to the highest social rank attainable by womankind.

Phyllis's beauty was chiefly accountable for

the event that afforded her so little gratification, whilst rendering her superlatively enviable to most of the ladies who witnessed her promotion. For, though her marriage preceded the rise of professional beauties by many years, she lived in a time when women, who had beauty without "professing it," were honoured and rewarded for their most obvious merit no less enthusiastically than the fascinating gentlewomen who in these later years of grace like to be photographed in fluffy hats or snow-storms, and feel they have not lived in vain when they see their "cartes de visite" offered for sale in the shop-windows at a shilling a-piece.

Always remarkable, the young woman's beauty thrived on love, and its fame had preceded her to London, travelling thither on the lips of the Marchioness of Lighthaven, the greatest lady of all Somerset, who, being herself a Queen of Society, had the intelligence to see that she would brighten her court and confirm her sway over mankind by luring Phyllis to Lighthaven House. It was well for Lady Lighthaven to go about London extolling the loveliness of the new beauty, who would come to town in a few days. For the topic warranted enthusiasm. But the marchioness was scarcely justified in claiming credit for discovering this flower of West Somerset. Phyllis may have blushed many times without

being seen, and wasted a great deal of sweetness on the desert air, but scores upon scores of people had discovered her beauty long before it attracted the most noble lady's attention. Owen Daylesford was not the only curate of the Wight to worship the charmer he might not possess; and Phyllis would scarcely have been Lady Champion at the opening of her acquaintance with the marchioness, had she not already been found out and brought to light. But though she cannot be credited with the discovery, there is no question that the marchioness advertised and puffed Lady Champion effectually in divers high and intensely aristocratic quarters that heretofore had heard nothing of her.

Hence it came to pass that even before she had been presented to her Sovereign, Sir Arthur Champion knew the world was bent on making much of his wife. Indeed had Phyllis only stooped to raise the circlet that Fashion laid at her feet, she would have been a leader of society ere she put foot in St. James's Palace. But with equal prudence and good taste she turned away from a distinction so likely to expose her to envy, and so little calculated to make her happier. And when, at a later stage of her career, Fashion fairly laid the crown upon her head, she took the earliest occasion to lay aside the decoration that only fretted her brow. If

Fashion was resolute, Phyllis also could be firm. And on this point she was firm even to obstinacy. The world insisted on making her a queen of society. To the last she insisted on being a queen without a crown.

The nature of Lady Champion's social influence is indicated by the fact that of all the complimentary epithets used in her honour none was uttered so often as the word "charming." She was commended on half a hundred grounds, applauded for half a hundred excellencies; but every eulogy of her virtues closed with a reference to her power of charming. It was so with the people who valued her most for her simplicity and considerateness, the fearless sincerity and winning candour of the lips that never flattered, but so often overflowed with praise. It was so with encomiasts of her figure, her face, her music, her dancing, her conversational tact, her taste in dress. Even the thoughtful men who detected unusual cleverness in her—not because she was really cleverer than the average of high-natured womankind, but because her self-reliant frankness set them thinking in new directions—could not declare their respect for her understanding without having recourse to the favourite epithet. The truth of the matter was that, in speaking of any of her endowments, everyone felt that the grace or faculty to which

he called particular attention was pervaded by something too fine and subtle for description. Young Viscount Tootle, heir-apparent of Earl Trumpeter of the peerage of Scotland, saw this truth and gave utterance to the general sentiment when he remarked to an intimate friend in the smoke-room of the Gorgonzola,

"No fellow can do that woman justice; for you see when he tells what she has done, a fellow can't tell *how* she *did* it. And the charm of what she does, you know, is her charming way of doing it."

But with all its subtle power, Lady Champion's charmingness was perhaps less accountable than the comprehensiveness and constant activity of her sympathies for the favour in which she was held by her acquaintance. For people to win her concern it was not necessary that they should be in want, sickness, sorrow, or any kind of trouble. Feeling tenderly for the poor and miserable, she felt also for and with the rich and happy. The woman, whose charity for the wicked was limitless and inexhaustible, abounded also in charity to the good. It cost her no effort to sympathize with common-place mediocrities of humankind who were not bright enough to be entertaining, nor dull enough to be pitiable, nor virtuous enough to be notable, nor sufficiently bad to be interesting.

Remarkable under the world's observation for dignified self-possession and a certain captivating self-reliance, she was even more remarkable for her absolute freedom from self-consciousness. In her solitary moments she often had the full benefit of her own undivided attention; and far from being a lenient judge of her own behaviour at these seasons of self-examination, she could make a fearfully bad case against herself to the Great Searcher of human hearts. But on going into the world, she ceased to be conscious of herself, passing completely with her whole mind and heart into the life of those who addressed her, so that she literally lost sight of her own individuality in their cares and humours. Instead of wanting them to live in her, she only desired to live in them; and there being no surer way of interesting others than being interested in them, it is not surprising that people never talked to Lady Champion without finding her a delightful companion. And of the many men who chatted with her in the course of every year, scarcely one in a hundred saw that his strong interest in her resulted in no small measure from the manifest interest she took in him. This faculty of losing herself in others, and interesting herself in persons who interested no one else, saved Phyllis from much weariness and many annoyances she would otherwise have had to

endure with a smiling face. Bores never bored her; the dull never irritated her. And whilst winning favour in every direction, she escaped a corresponding amount of enmity through being able to find entertainment in everybody.

To the same saving and beneficent faculty must be referred Lady Champion's enviable good fortune in being quite as popular with women as with men. Satirical literature delights to make merry with the reluctance of womankind to recognize the merit of the women who are especially acceptable and attractive to the other sex. And it cannot be denied that ladies are sometimes perplexingly blind to matters that are obvious and dazzling as the midday sun to their husbands and other coat-wearing people. But it does not follow that this wilful blindness is unaccountable or unnatural. Still less does it follow that the equally fascinating and triumphant creatures have any fair ground of complaint against the less fortunate and charming exhibitors of bare arms and shoulders, who refuse to be fascinated by them. In society admiration is the prize for which all women, less virtuous than Phyllis, play and strive, to the best of the powers accorded them by art and nature, —in some cases staking by turns money, health, self-respect, honour, peace of mind, every chance of happiness, for the attainment of the one object.

And it must be confessed that the winners in this fiercely exciting game are not always so considerate as they might be of the feelings of the losers. If a little temper and a few hot words are venial in the man who, after losing heavily at écarté, and paying his losses with due complaisance, is rudely taunted and derided for his misadventure by the winner of his money, a little injustice and asperity may surely be conceded to the vanquished ladies who must smile and hide their chagrin when night after night a victorious competitor for masculine approval says to them by a sly glance or cruel smile,

"See, my sisters, I have more admirers than you, because I am more admirable!"

Women never questioned Lady Champion's title to the homage that was rendered her wherever she went; and, with the single exception of Erica Rapier, no woman ever grudged Phyllis the admiration which she received with serenity, and was always glad to divert to others. Amiability having in these later years come to be regarded as a synonym for mental weakness, a novelist may well hesitate to commend his heroine for being amiable. But it is a fact that Lady Champion would have been less charming had she not possessed so singular a sweetness of disposition that people loved her chiefly because she was, in the best sense of the word, lovable.

CHAPTER XIV.

THOSE HAPPY YEARS.

In the first four years of their married life Sir Arthur and Lady Champion had a measure of felicity seldom granted in so brief a time to a man and woman. Under less favourable circumstances, they would have been supremely happy, for their mutual love grew and deepened as the days and years passed lightly. But the conditions of their existence favoured their joy in each other, and their satisfaction with the whole world. Living, when they were in London, in circles where manners are gentler, aspirations loftier, and natures nobler than in circles where social friction is fiercer and more fruitful of fireside jealousy and mean antipathies, they had familiar intercourse with the men and women who make history and are themselves history,—those chief actors of their time, whom a simple gentleman doing his appointed duty in a provincial town is thankful to watch from the distance through books and newspapers, deeming himself fortunate if he is permitted to speak with anyone of them once and again in his whole life's course. In May and June they doubtless had more gaiety than they cared for; but, even in these months of haste and successive excite-

ments, their life was less feverish and distracting than people who know a little, and no more than a little, of the brilliant agitations of the great world are likely to imagine it.

But if the London season occasionally made Arthur and Phyllis wish for a calmer time, they soon had their wish in the quietude of Queenscote, whither they invited but few of their London friends, and saw only enough of "the neighbourhood" to maintain a character for kindliness and sociability. At Queenscote Phyllis had time for reading and meditation, exercises so needful for the soul's growth and health. At Queenscote, in the tranquil glades and broken avenues, she could enjoy her husband's voice—ever gentler and wiser and more musical when heard under rustling boughs than in places where he was only one of many speakers. At Queenscote she had leisure for close communion with Erica Rapier, whom she cherished with unconstrained affection, and prized for the generous qualities that were not altogether the mere creations of Lady Champion's generous fancy. In the country she had better opportunities for carrying out her resolution to show Cyril kindness for his own as well as for his father's sake. It was also in Somerset that the affectionate creature could best enjoy the companionship of dear Aunt Tournament and her friend Evelina Brook. But

stronger than all her other reasons for delighting in Queenscote and loving it was the consideration that she there saw most of her children—Archibald, the brave, bright-eyed Harrovian; Beatrice, whose enthusiasm for her new mamma did not pass off as Aunt Erica hoped it would; and that marvellous and ineffably perfect pink-and-white performance of baby-culture, over whose cradle Phyllis would sit fondly for hours together, saying in her joyful heart, "It is my own!" Bearing the name of Arthur, this idolized infant began his exemplary career by coming into the world at the most convenient moment for his appearance, in the February of his mamma's second married year, so that she could brighten the ensuing London season, as though no such disturbing incident had occurred in the first week of the year's second month.

Let it not, however, be imagined that, when she was absent from London, Phyllis spent all her days in Somerset during those four happy years. The winter in Rome and the trip to the Holy Land were projects to be executed in the future; but in each of those years Lady Champion made a brief, quick, vivid, animating trip to the Continent. Twice (in September) she paid a visit to the Antonines at Cannes; another year she ran over to Switzerland, returning to Queenscote with an alpenstock imprinted with a pro-

digious number of names; and in the fourth year of that blissful period she went to Paris for ten days at Easter.

Of all the people who watched Phyllis Champion's happiness throughout these four years, none had sounder grounds for regarding it with complaisance than the two wretched persons who, deeming it only so much happiness taken from them, were bent on marring it. Society had reason to think Erica Rapier singularly fortunate in having for a round-about sister-in-law a woman so perplexingly amiable as to afford her the fullest freedom with her sister's children, and, whilst taking her husband's deceased wife's sister into her closest confidence, to encourage Sir Arthur Champion to show her the same flattering preference he was wont to show her before his second marriage. At the same time it was the universal remark of the studios that Cyril Twyford was a singularly lucky fellow in the possession of so powerful a cousin as Lady Champion, whose splendid match had been made just in time to preserve him from going at once and for ever to "the dogs."

Phyllis had not been many weeks in St. James's Park before she saw it would not be difficult for her to render her scapegrace cousin substantial service in the way of his profession. When with a blush on her cheek she debated in

her morning-room at Queenscote how far she could go with propriety in touting for commissions for him amongst her county neighbours, she had not taken possession of her town house. But, after her startling success in London, she could accomplish her benevolent purpose without asking a favour of anyone. A woman of fashion has only to do a thing, if she would have other people do likewise. By merely showing Cyril Twyford's sketches of Archie and Beatrice to her friends, she determined them to employ the same artist to produce likenesses in the same style of the children in whom they were most strongly interested. Her acknowledgment of the artist as her cousin was enough to make them adopt her cousin as their artist. In the grades of affluent merchantdom and genteel bourgeoisie, there would perhaps have been much small and snobbish tattle about Lady Champion's cousin being *only* a professional artist, who could not get into the Academy. But it never occurred to the majority of Lady Champion's friends to consider whether Cyril Twyford's calling did her credit or discredit, or whether she took an unusual course in making it known that he could take children's portraits uncommonly well. It was enough for them to see that Mr. Cyril Twyford was personable, well-mannered, and rather amusing, and to ask him to draw and paint pictures for them,

partly because he was a sufficient artist, but chiefly because they wished to please Lady Champion and go with the fashion. And amongst the minority, who thought it a little strange for Lady Champion's cousin to be following art for a livelihood, the opinion prevailed that it was just like her pluck and simple dignity to give him the helping hand so bravely and prettily.

The effects of the helping hand were soon apparent to the studios in the doings of the artist, who had entered a season of prosperity that would have enabled a less reckless adventurer to spend freely and yet lay by a few thousands. But prudence was no virtue for Cyril Twyford to practise. Retaining his old chambers near Tottenham Court Road as a convenient residence for Marion Hope, and a place of occasional retreat for himself, he took another studio and set of rooms in a quarter adjacent to parks and squares affected by "society," bought a park-hack for three hundred guineas, gained admission to a new club with an evil reputation for "high play," and summoned to his assistance a supremely fashionable tailor who could only make coats, and another supremely fashionable tailor who could only make trousers. On seeing how gallantly he accommodated himself to his altered circumstances, Miss Rapier of Thurlow Lodge

ceased to fear that her control over him would in the long run be weakened by his cousin's care for his interests. The ill-fame of Cyril Twyford's new club was a sufficient guarantee to the lady that her tool would soon outrun his luck, and be looking to her again as the only power on earth to save him from immediate ruin. In the meantime, all the money he earned from Lady Champion's friends, Miss Rapier reflected with something of her grandfather Rennard's commercial shrewdness, would be money saved to the woman who, for the attainment of her great end, had resolved to support him in his career of self-indulgence to the extreme limits of her ability.

It may not, however, be imagined that the artist's obligations to his cousin tended in any degree to moderate his animosity towards her. Even if sentiments of gratitude could under any circumstances have affected him graciously, the fuel with which Erica Rapier fed his resentment against the perfidious Phyllis would have prevented it from dying out. But Miss Rapier might have spared her pains to keep the furnace of his wrath from cooling. For Cyril Twyford was one of the men who never fail to repay good with evil services. In his better time of boyish weakness and folly, his insolence and vanity never allowed him to be steadily loyal to

those who had claims on his loyalty. Throughout his career he treated his comrades badly in proportion as they treated him well; and now that he was hastening to the last and worst stage of his wickedness, he regarded his benefactors with a malignity that may almost be called insane. Instead of softening his temper, Phyllis's beneficence incensed it. And those only who have studied men of his scarcely uncommon kind can conceive all the egregious processes by which Cyril Twyford multiplied and magnified the wrongs Lady Champion had never done him, till he sincerely believed he could not wreak on her a vengeance adequate to her offences. To his fancy her modest fortune of £12,000 was an insignificant fraction of the wealth she had taken from him. In addition to that sum, she had despoiled him of all he might have done with it —all he might have won by its means. Yet further, in fiercer and wilder moments, he could not separate the fortune he had hoped to get with Phyllis from all the wealth and power and grandeur to which it had been added. He could not discriminate between the Phyllis Lovelock of Evensong, who was formerly within his reach, and the Lady Champion of St. James's Park and Queenscote, who was so far above him. The two women were the same woman who, somehow or other, had deprived him of all the wealth

and pomp and *éclat* that came to her through her marriage with a man of rank and great estate.

Whilst thinking thus amiably of his cousin, Mr. Twyford accepted her kind services as though he valued them chiefly for the spirit that inspired them. Seeing her once or twice a week in London, where she invited him to her entertainments, and took him to so many great houses that he may be pardoned for thinking himself a gentleman of high fashion, he was also a frequent visitor at her country house. Indeed, he had a standing invitation from Sir Arthur and Phyllis to come to them in Somerset at his pleasure, whenever they were there; and that he should avail himself the oftener of this hospitable permission, a bed-room, that came to be known in the household by his name, was assigned to his use, and always kept ready for him at Queenscote.

At the same time Sir Arthur and Lady Champion maintained the friendliest relations with Erica Rapier, who played her game so adroitly as to be the confidante of both the husband and the wife, and to win from each of them sincere gratitude for her devotion to the other. When Lady Champion was in town, and Sir Arthur Champion's parliamentary duties prevented him from attending her to opera or ball,

theatre or rout, she was usually accompanied to the places of amusement by her husband's sister-in-law. And when the Champions were in Somerset, if Erica Rapier was not with them, letters passed between Thurlow Lodge and Queenscote once, twice, or even three times a week.

"No," Miss Rapier remarked, in answer to a question from Cyril Twyford, "it is not difficult to keep in with both. They are very much in love with each other. So when I am alone with Arthur, I praise Phyllis, and when I am alone with Phyllis, I praise Arthur; and so they both think me a delightful companion, and a dear, sweet, generous woman. The work is simple enough, but sometimes, I must confess, it is tedious."

Whilst Lady Champion and Erica Rapier were such good friends, it is not wonderful that society was greatly edified by the spectacle of two gentlewomen living together in amity, when it would have been only natural for them to be madly jealous of one another.

CHAPTER XV.

CHANGE OF WEATHER.

But Arthur and Phyllis Champion had barely entered the fifth year of their married life, when

a cloud appeared in the heaven of their happiness. No transient vapour to fall in rain or pass into the blue sky, the cloud grew while it lingered, and deepened as it grew till its gloom was appalling, and its shadow a darkness that could be felt.

They were at Queenscote on the bright September day that, finding them in felicity, left them in the first disquiet of coming trouble; and Phyllis, seated at the foot of a noble beech in one of the broken avenues, was still sketching a yet grander tree and chatting with her cousin, the companion of her labours, when the filmy threads of hazy whiteness stealing out of the azure drew and drifted together into a presage of the approaching storm. And only a few minutes before this faintly perceptible sign of future disturbance caught Arthur Champion's attention, he and his sister-in-law in their after-breakfast ramble round and about the park had come upon the artists at the foot of the Prior's Beech, and held with them a talk that closed thus:—

"You enjoy the day, my beauty! Your looks tell how you are enjoying it!" said Arthur Champion, regarding his wife tenderly.

"Enjoy it?" replied Phyllis lightly, with a girlish heartiness. "I enjoy the sunlight and the happy breeze, and the dear old park, and

that grand, royal-hearted old beech, that stands there looking down upon us like a friend. And it is like the old happy time in the Wight to have a sketching lesson in the open air from Cyril!"

"And what says the teacher of his pupil?" asked Arthur Champion of the artist, without taking his eyes from Phyllis's happy face.

"Don't ask him," cried Phyllis gaily, "for he is sure to praise me. Everything I do has his approval."

"Then I will take Erica's opinion."

"Worse and worse," was the rejoinder, "for she outruns Cyril in flattering me. No, sir, their flattery is enough, and you shouldn't join their conspiracy to praise and pet me into a simpleton. Erica, take Arthur away; for he stops work, and I want to finish my sketch."

"You'll be in to luncheon?" said Arthur, looking at his watch. "You have still almost an hour."

"I will be punctual to the minute, sir; I am always ready for luncheon!" answered Lady Champion, with a note of cordial concurrence that would have beseemed a lady who prized material enjoyments above all other pleasures.

"Then, Erica, if you are ready, we will go," said the master of Queenscote.

Soon after the conversation, which had this

ending in the Prior's Avenue, Erica Rapier, seating herself on a bench in the Queenscote gardens, and with a nod inviting her companion to sit beside her, said,

"I want to talk to you, Arthur. I have long wanted to talk to you, and I'll speak now."

"Say on. I am your listener!" said Arthur Champion, obeying the nod.

"Why let them be so much together?" asked Erica, nodding in the direction of the Prior's Avenue.

"Good heavens! Why not? Why should they not be together? They are cousins!" ejaculated Arthur Champion, with sudden astonishment in the violet-dark eyes that glowed with more of alarm than displeasure, as he continued to regard his sister-in-law intently throughout the conversation now to be recorded.

"True, they are cousins. And that's the worst of it!" answered Erica, who throughout the talk spoke in a low voice and with admirable nerve.

"The worst of it? In heaven's name, what do you mean?"

"It makes it so difficult to separate them."

"And why should they be separated?"

"For her happiness, your honour!"

"By the Lord who made and will judge you, Erica, you cannot whisper, breathe, think a word against Phyllis's honour."

"*Her* honour? No woman, however bad, could do that. She is pure as any new-opened flower. When she goes to heaven, Arthur, she will find in it no angel brighter, gentler, purer of evil—or the possibility of evil—than she is now. I spoke only of *her* happiness and *your* honour?"

"And why can her happiness require me to withdraw her from her cousin's society?"

"Because her happiness lives in your honour and would perish with it!"

"Be plainer, I implore you, Erica. How can their cousinly intercourse touch my honour?"

"Because they are talked about to your dishonour. The world—the gossip-mongers who make up the whole world—will have it that they were engaged; and I can't make people to believe there never was an engagement between them. When I tell them that I knew her years before you ever saw her, when I declare to them that I know every turn of her life and his relations to her, when I pledge my honour that their fathers' fancy for a match between them never resulted in an engagement, they nod their heads, smile at my simplicity, and hold to their misconception. What I say does more harm than good; for some of the tattlers have slapped my face with, 'But even you admit there was something between them that was almost the same as an engagement.'"

"And if Phyllis had been engaged to him in her sixteenth year, surely they might be familiar cousins now."

"I have never had the hardihood to say that to the tattlers, though I think it. But for her sake, Arthur, you may not fight the world's folly, but humour it. People have taken it into their heads that they see too much of each other. And it cannot be denied they are together a great deal. In London no one goes oftener to your house than that man; and people see him in Phyllis's box at the opera. And then he comes here a great deal. And those vile, wretched gossip-mongers go about whispering that she has an evil motive for showing him so much kindness. I tell you, Arthur, you should separate them for her sake as much as your own. If you don't, people will say you connive at an intercourse that should not exist between them."

"Impossible!" groaned Arthur Champion. "My worst enemy could not make such a suggestion. If he did, the slander would be forced back and down his throat by its hearers."

"The same charge has, with less injustice, been made ere now against men as honourable as yourself. There are malignant men, and malignant women, too, who delight in saying what is odious of a man who has married a woman much younger than himself."

"Let them say what they like of me, Erica, if they only spare her."

"But they won't spare her, or you either, if you let her see so much of him. And even if this vile, scandalous talk were not going about, you should not let her see so much of him. He is no fit friend for her. She ought not to know a *mauvais sujet* so intimately."

"His character? What do you know of it?"

"That it is as bad as his worst enemies would have it. Why is he not in the Academy?"

"You are strangely hard on his want of success. To be unsuccessful is not quite so shameful as you suggest."

"It is shameful for a man at forty to be at the same time so clever and so unsuccessful as *he* is. The man's cleverness would have brought him into the Academy ten years since, if he had had a decent reputation. He is an 'outsider,' not because he can't paint well, but because he has lived ill. People tell you nothing to his discredit, because he is Phyllis's cousin and may be said to live under your countenance. But go to the studios, and ask your artist friends in confidence what they know and think of our darling's cousin, and they won't tell you much good of him."

"It is clear you don't think well of him."

"I think of him, Arthur, as well as he deserves, and no better."

"You certainly have had opportunities for studying and knowing him. You have seen a great deal of him. At one time you thought less unfavourably of him."

"I made his acquaintance in your interest. There are not many things I should decline to do for your sake. I have been very friendly with him from two motives—to give her pleasure, and to have her love. To give her pleasure, I would be civil to even worse men than her cousin. Rather than lose, or run a risk of losing, her love, I would do even you an injury."

"But what is there so much against him?"

"Everything!"

"You speak from your knowledge?"

"Of course. In such a business as this I am not likely to speak from hearsay."

"And you know?"

"That he is a bad, worthless fellow—dissolute with women, wine, his tradesmen's goods, his own money, his friends' money. Moreover, he is vain, even to madness."

"Why close the count of crimes with mention of a mere weakness? You might as well have been silent about the vanity."

"I noticed it because his vanity may be, and probably has been, hurtful to our Phyllis."

"How so?"

"How came the tattlers to imagine your wife was at one time engaged to him? How came such a notion into their silly heads?"

"Heaven knows."

"And so does Mr. Twyford, unless I am mistaken."

"Do you *know* that he has told people he was in former time engaged to Phyllis?"

"I *don't know it*," returned Erica Rapier, with the air of a person desirous of keeping within the limits of her knowledge and of going no word beyond the truth, "but I have a strong suspicion that, out of paltry vanity, he has been boasting of his boyish love of his cousin, and her love of him. Of course he is vastly proud of his cousin now that she is Lady Champion, and a leader of fashion. And the man is as vain as he is false. But," she continued, in an altered voice, rising from her seat, and glancing in the direction where Cyril Twyford and Phyllis could be seen coming over the park from the Prior's Avenue towards the house, "enough of this for the present! We will talk more at another time. See, they are coming; and they had better not think we have been talking about them. Let us go to the hall, and be at luncheon when they join us."

"We must speak more on this matter. Let

us walk together in the park this afternoon," said Arthur Champion, rising also.

"By all means. Phyllis will be driving to Eastwick. Let him go with her," replied the sister-in-law, adding in a tone of low, earnest, keenly anxious entreaty, as she moved across the lawn towards the Long Terrace, "But, oh! dear Arthur, we must be very careful to keep all knowledge of this terrible business from dear Phyllis. She may know nothing of our trouble for her."

"Of course—of course," said Arthur Champion decidedly. Glancing at his companion, he added, "You can't think me such a blockhead as to be likely to vex her in that way? On that score, your mind may be at ease."

"She is so sensitive and simple, and unsuspicious of the world's wickedness and cruelty; so incapable of imagining people capable of wronging her, as they *do wrong her* in *words* as well as in *thought*, that I do verily believe, Arthur, the shock of learning what evil is being whispered about her would kill her—yes, Arthur, kill her."

"Control yourself, my dear," returned Arthur Champion, altogether of the alarming opinion that his sister-in-law expressed so forcibly and fondly. "We must both keep our counsel!"

"And don't change your manner to her cousin."

"Good heavens! Why not?" ejaculated the

baronet. "You would not have me play the hypocrite to him? I must take a new line clearly and firmly and at once to him."

"Indeed, indeed," was the answer, made with increasing vehemence, but in a still lower tone, for they were already on the terrace, and within thirty paces of ground where they would need to be cautious of servants' ears, "you may not be precipitate. A sudden change in your manner to him would alarm her, might even bring to her knowledge what *we* mean to keep from her. You would not have her suspect *you* of being jealous of *him!* And, oh! dearest Arthur, I would not have her accuse me of setting you against her cousin! With her strong, pure, warm, cousinly affection for him, she would cease to love me, if she thought me his enemy. This is a strangely little, mean, selfish thing perhaps for me to trouble you about at this moment. Of course I should not have a single thought for myself. But I must be selfish in regard to her affection and her sweet sisterly goodness to me. For my sake, do be careful."

"For your sake, dear Erica," replied the man, who was not a little moved by this display of his sister-in-law's tender though selfish care for her place in his wife's affection, "I will be cautious. It is not a light matter to which you call my attention. For *your* sake, as well as for dear Phyllis's

sake, I will be very careful. Heaven bless you, dear Erica, for all your goodness to me and her! But come, there's the gong for luncheon."

Five minutes later, when Lady Champion and Cyril Twyford had seated themselves at the luncheon-table in the great hall, Phyllis felt rather than saw that a change had come over her husband's mind—ay, over his regard for her—since he left her at the foot of the Prior's Beech. She could not conceive the cause, or even tell the nature of the change; she could not have put in words *how* she acquired the knowledge that entered her soul through her nervous sensibilities from indications too fine for vision, so delicate that they could only be felt. His face had all the gentle composure and dignified refinement that were amongst its most striking characteristics. It was not gloomy, or patient, or dejected; on the contrary, as luncheon went on, smiles played over his features. But a light, that Phyllis alone could feel rather than see, had gone from the face. There was a corresponding change in the voice, that had never yet been hard to any living thing in Phyllis's hearing. It was the same rich, gentle, gracious voice; it was his voice, and yet differed from it in a way she only could feel. The musician, whose instrument is finely sensitive of atmospheric influences, feels some such difference on

an inauspicious day when the instrument is in tune, and yet wants its finer tone.

After luncheon, when Cyril Twyford and Erica Rapier had gone to the terrace—the artist to smoke a little cigar and Erica to chat to him whilst he smoked it—Phyllis went noiselessly as the scent of a flower up to Arthur, and, placing her right hand lightly and fondly on his left shoulder, said, with simple tenderness,

"Husband, you are not happy."

"Not happy with my soul's joy so close to me!" he answered. "How can that be?"

"Joy may be very near us, Arthur, and yet far away," was the answer, made with a curious combination of pathos and playfulness. "Dear boy, you are not happy!"

"Who told you so?—what tells you so?"

"This thing—only that," replied Phyllis, raising her left hand towards her heart.

"Beauty, you may be right. If you are right, at least you are none to blame. No man is always happy; and this thing," said Arthur Champion, catching his wife's voice as he mimicked her action, "had better keep its unrest to itself. 'Tis an old saying and a wise one, Phyllis, that every man is the keeper of his own sorrow."

Instead of denying the adage's wisdom, and combating the mood that had caused its utterance, as a less sensitive and sympathetic woman

would have done, Phyllis only pressed Arthur's hand to her lips and for a single second smiled at him, before she went away.

But though the sun shone in the heavens over Phyllis as she drove with her cousin to make the call at Eastwick, there was a gathering of clouds that darkened her heart.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN AND OUT OF TOWN.

It having been arranged for Cyril Twyford to leave Qneenscote on the morrow of the incidents set forth in the last chapter, Sir Arthur Champion had the comfort of knowing that in the course of a few hours he would, at least for a while, be quit of the guest who had outstayed his welcome. And the artist, who was longing to run off with Marion Hope to one of his favourite continental resorts, had no wish to disappoint his cousin's husband by prolonging his stay at Queenscote, now that he had helped to celebrate the fourth anniversary of Phyllis's wedding-day, and could for the moment do nothing more to bring her to ruin and shame in a future no longer distant. In accordance, therefore, with a plan settled a fortnight since, the artist, with Lady Champion's cordial wishes for his enjoy-

ment of his autumnal holiday, and with notes in his pocket for the five hundred pounds recently paid him by Miss Rapier for a picture barely worth a fifth of that sum, took train from Bath to Southampton, where he was met by Mrs. Twyford in a costume that made her look more than ever "like the real thing."

The artist having retired from a scene that no longer needed his presence, Sir Arthur Champion surprised Phyllis by discovering that urgent business required him to go to London for a few days; and, having made this discovery, he went his way thither, after saying much more to Erica than to his wife of his motive for going to town at a time when all the world was in the country. But though his action perplexed Phyllis even more than it astonished her, the baronet knew his own mind, and was taking the best steps to satisfy its craving for further information on matters about which he did not care to trouble Lady Champion.

Notwithstanding its desertion by people of superior quality, London still detained within its limits a few of the less fashionable members of the baronet's acquaintance; and as they were precisely the people to give him sure intelligence respecting Cyril Twyford's reputation in the studios, and his ways of life from his boyhood to the date of his cousin's marriage, the Member

for Hartrest can scarcely be blamed for taking a course that he could not think likely to contribute to Phyllis's peace of mind.

Ten days later, on his return to Queenscote, where Erica Rapier had remained with Phyllis during his absence from home, it was obvious at a glance to both ladies that the trip to London had not given him a lighter heart. To Phyllis his face and voice still wanted the subtle qualities that left them so suddenly and unaccountably on his way from the Prior's Avenue to the luncheon-table. One quick, burning look from the violet-dark eyes told Miss Rapier that he had fared in London just as she meant him to fare, when she advised him to go there and learn for himself what he ought to know from men's lips of the life and character of the man whose name and story were so hatefully and painfully associated by the tattlers with his cousin's beauty and stainless record.

It often happens that a man is the last to hear of the shame lurking within his own domestic circle; the last to receive information of matters touching his honour and happiness more deeply than the honour and happiness of any other living person. Kindliness concurs with the dictates of common decency to restrain people from speaking to a friend of matters it would pain him either to learn for the first time or to be remind-

ed of. And that Erica Rapier was the first person to speak in Cyril Twyford's dispraise to Sir Arthur Champion is the less remarkable, because at present the artist was not known to have committed any such outrages as would make it incumbent on men of honour to denounce their perpetrator wherever they met him, and to compass his exclusion from every honest company to which he might gain admittance.

Had he been ever convicted of foul play, fraud in the picture market, or any other enormity beyond the bounds of social tolerance, persons would have had the courage to risk Sir Arthur Champion's displeasure by advising him to withdraw his countenance from such a reprobate. But though he had justly earned the strenuous censure of the elders of his profession, and was deemed a prodigy of wickedness in certain serious and severely respectable families, his known offences were the immoralities which society easily condones, and sometimes even applauds in its favourites. Coming upon town in the days of "fast men," he had contracted their habits and persisted in their vices. Without exceeding the fervour seemly in a virtuous woman when she gives fireside evidence about a naughty man, Miss Rapier had stated the case strongly against her *protégé*. He was a prodigal, dissolute with play, drink, and money; and his relations with

the gentler sex were not of a kind to commend him to rigid moralists. In other words, he was just such a man as Arthur took him for at the outset of their acquaintance, when he rated him vaguely and good-humouredly as "something of a Bohemian." Under these circumstances it would have been strange had anyone gone out of his way to warn Sir Arthur Champion against his wife's cousin. Even in his soreness and irritation at learning how the gossip of the town coupled Lady Champion with her cousin, it never for an instant occurred to Sir Arthur Champion to charge any of his friends with disloyalty for not assuring him the artist was very much the kind of man he had all along thought him.

But because he could tolerate from a distance the Bohemianism of the artist who was only Lady Champion's cousin, it does not follow that Sir Arthur Champion could be equally lenient to the Bohemianism of the artist who, besides being Lady Champion's cousin, was a person whom she was believed to regard with a peculiar, though innocent tenderness, on account of her former engagement to him. On the contrary, it nauseated him to reflect that society credited his lofty-natured Phyllis with compassion for a man, coarse and gross enough to live as he was known throughout the studios to be still living, and to have lived for years, in Fitzroy Square. Till he

went to town for the purpose of making inquiries about the artist, Arthur Champion had neither heard aught of Marion Hope, nor had any curiosity touching the character of his establishment in Fitzroy Square. But, on learning all about the woman and her home near Tottenham Court Road, the man of fine taste and chivalric devotion to his ideal of feminine grace and goodness was furious to think he had permitted and encouraged Phyllis to maintain close cousinly relations with Mrs. Twyford's patron.

Having gone up to town with a faint hope of satisfying himself that Erica Rapier had attached too much importance to the tattle of a few "sets," Arthur Champion ascertained with no ordinary annoyance that the rumour she had brought to his ears was unquestionably current throughout "society." On this point he could have no doubt, after a strictly confidential talk with one of his oldest and most trusty friends—a man who deserved his reputation for having a larger acquaintance in the high world than any of his social competitors, and with being in the confidence of every coterie of "the town."

From this gentleman (fortunately in London for a few hours when Arthur Champion sought him at his clubs with only the slightest expectation of finding him) the baronet of Queenscote learnt that the rumour was universally prevalent

in the circles of which Lady Champion was a chief ornament. As Arthur Champion, with all his sensitiveness and alarm at his sister-in-law's communications, had not imagined the gossip-mongers capable of seriously imputing grave wrong, or even indiscretion, to Phyllis, it afforded him little comfort that his friend, whilst confirming Erica Rapier's report, declared upon his honour that he had never heard a single whisper incongruent with the almost reverential admiration in which Lady Champion had been held by society from the date of her first appearance in the ways of Fashion. She was mentioned in connection with her cousin, so often seen with her in public places, as well as at her house in St. James's Park. Rumour ran that she had in former years been engaged to Mr. Cyril Twyford. It had also been current in the town for the two last seasons that Lady Champion took a generous, womanly delight in forwarding the professional interests of the cousin whom she compassionated for his several misadventures, the chief of which was his failure to hold her affection after winning it for a moment. On being asked if he could refer the baseless rumour to its original source, Arthur Champion's informant remarked with a significant smile that, if one of the cousins set the false story going, no one could suspect Lady Champion of the mistake.

"Has he," asked Arthur Champion, "ever been heard to refer to the engagement as a fact, or been known to give the rumour any countenance?"

"I don't care to answer either of those questions in the affirmative, for I don't think I should be justified in doing so," was the cautious reply from the visible and substantially embodied Spirit of the Clubs. "But there is no doubt, Champion, your cousin-in-law is as vain as a peacock, and is an egregious chatterer."

Arthur Champion went back to Queenscote with clear perception and firm resolve that something should be done to put Cyril Twyford at such a distance from Phyllis as would relieve her of the suspicion of cherishing for him any regard warmer than cousinly friendliness. The artist must no longer accompany her to places of public amusement or private diversion. He must not be invited to her house in St. James's Park more than twice or thrice in the London season. His standing invitation to Queenscote must be withdrawn, and he must not come there oftener than once in the year, and then only for a short visit —for two or three nights, or at the most for the inside of a week. Ordinary intercourse having been substituted for the unusual intimacy that had hitherto existed between the cousins, society would no longer offer attention to the painter

out of complaisance to Phyllis, and would soon survive the erroneous notion that they had in former time been especially dear to one another. Seeing him less, the world would think less of Mr. Twyford, and its estimate of Lady Champion's concern for him would be first modified and then altogether changed.

But, whilst taking this reasonable view of the requirements of the case, Sir Arthur Champion did not see how to satisfy them. If Cyril Twyford had been connected with him by no domestic tie, and if the difficulty between them had involved no considerations of the nicest delicacy, Arthur's course would have been obvious and easy. It would only have been needful for him to send the artist fewer invitations and address him with significant reserve or coldness when they chanced to meet; and in case Mr. Twyford demanded the reason for the alteration of demeanour, to reply with greater coldness and huff him politely. But the baronet could not drop his wife's cousin like a mere casual acquaintance. He must avoid wounding *her* by a show of unfriendliness to *him*. Care for *her* feelings forbade him to reveal his reasons for wishing they should see much less of her cousin. He might neither show the wish, nor do anything likely to result in her discovery of it; for if she detected his purpose, she would seek and soon

discover the reasons and motives for it, in which case she would be unutterably wretched, even if she did not justify Erica Rapier's worst fears by dying of the shock of shame and terror that the revelations would certainly occasion her. Moreover, he shrunk selfishly, as well as for her sake, from the thought of doing aught that could make her suspect he was jealous of her cousin. This is noteworthy. For the small, secret, selfish fear lest she should suspect him of so miserable a weakness was the small seed that, cleverly planted in his breast by Erica Rapier, was destined to grow there and bring forth some of jealousy's bitterest and most poisonous fruits.

CHAPTER XVII.

OFF TO ROME.

HAVING had time in London to meditate on these matters. and on half a hundred questions arising from them, Sir Arthur Champion returned to Queenscote with a purpose that, unlike the larger and ulterior end which it was meant to further, he could announce to Phyllis fearlessly. And on making it known to her and Erica Rapier at the same time, as they sat together in the blue drawing-room on the evening after his re-appearance at Queenscote, he caused the two women equal surprise.

"Phyllis," he said, revealing his purpose in the fewest possible words, "let us go to Rome for the winter."

"To Rome?" ejaculated Phyllis.

"To Rome! We have often talked of going there for a winter. There will never be a better time for the execution of our plan than this present time: that is to say, if you are in the humour for the trip. Everything, of course, in such a matter depends on your wishes. If you do not care to go, I shall dismiss the notion. I should not care, my beauty, to go without you. But I have set my heart on wintering at Rome this very next winter, if you can accompany me cheerfully. What say you?"

"It will be delightful, positively delightful!" cried Phyllis, flushing joyfully. And then checking herself with a thought that came quickly and keenly to her womanly heart, she added, with more concern than delight, "But there are the children, Arthur!"

"That matter is easily settled. Beatrice is no child of yours: she is Erica's child: and Erica must do her duty like the good mother she would be, if you were not continually having her child from Thurlow Lodge. So Beatrice is off your hands. Archibald's game at Christmas will be to visit the homes of some of his Christ Church friends; and for whatever part of the Oxford

You remember, Phyllis, catching me in a mood that made you think me unhappy on the bright day that saw you finish your sketch of the Prior's Beech? Well, I went to Dr. Goodenough for a tonic, and he counsels change. So we will go off to Rome and hunt for old coins, while the people at home are hunting old foxes."

On the morrow of these interesting communications from the baronet of Queenscote to the women who loved him, Erica Rapier remarked to her brother-in-law, as they walked on the lawn under the long terrace,

"Your plan for wintering in Rome is a good one, Arthur. You will do well to get her out of the country before her cousin returns to it from Baden-Baden with empty pockets."

"The stay in Rome," was the answer, "will break their intercourse; and, before we return, we can devise means, or a hundred things may happen, to keep them apart still longer."

"But you mayn't stay away for an unreasonable time."

"Surely, provided I have due consideration for the interests of my Hartrest constituents, the time for my return is a point to be settled by my convenience."

"Of course. My advice was directed to a question of convenience. Don't stay away an *inconveniently* long time."

"What do you mean?"

"Easter falls early this year. Well, at the latest, start for England as soon as possible after Easter week, so as to be in St. James's Park in the height of the season."

"Eh?" said Arthur Champion quickly, with a new look of trouble showing that he caught the full significance of the words.

"If you are not seen about during the season, people will say you have taken her abroad to keep her out of *his* way. It would be a pity to give occasion for such a rumour."

"My friends shall not have an opportunity—at least, they shall not have an excuse for amusing themselves in that way!" was the answer made with the speaker's old official coldness, but with as much bitterness as the man's fine breeding ever imparted to his words. "We shall be in London within a week or two of the Easter holidays."

"I should be sorry you did otherwise. No earthly power can prevent people from talking. And *you* know they *will* talk if they don't see you in the old places. And for her sake we must arrange so that her cousin is seen with her now and then. Even if we could get quit of him at once, without paining her or rousing her suspicions, it would be foolish to do so. In separating *them*, you must have care for the

world's opinion, as well as for *her* feelings. Should their intercourse be broken abruptly, people would say you had dropped him because you had cause to be jealous of him. We must contrive that the cousins drift apart gradually."

"I wish he would do me the service of breaking his neck or blowing out his brains before we return to England."

"Either accident may happen!" Erica Rapier replied hopefully. "Good horsemen are killed in the hunting-field as often as bad ones. And ill luck at play may drive him to put a pistol to his head. Go away, hoping for the best. But should he live to welcome you on your return, you must take his hand without letting him see how completely he has lost your heart. I should grudge him the triumph of knowing his power to ruffle your equanimity. To give him the keenest delight of which he is capable, you have only to let him think you are jealous of him."

If Phyllis's appearance on the lawn had not closed this interesting conversation, Miss Rapier would probably have ended it of her own accord; for she was too skilful in the art of sowing discord, and too dexterous a manipulator of masculine feelings, not to see from the set of Arthur Champion's thin lips and distended nostrils, from the glowing anger of his eyes, and the whole air of his firm, motionlesss, whitening face, that she

had for the present done enough "gardening" in the soil of his sensitive nature.

So it was settled that Phyllis and her husband should winter in Rome; and during the next five weeks she busied herself with preparations for the long absence from England. When Isabel had withdrawn a litter of unfinished fancy-work and music, and sketching paraphernalia and countless decorative trifles, from the reception-rooms of Queenscote, and packed them into drawers in obedience to Lady Champion's particular instructions; when the same indefatigable maid had put robes and dresses by the score into divers wardrobes, and other robes and dresses by the score into boxes and trunks; when Lady Champion had written tidings of her design to half a hundred friends; when a flying visit of farewell had been paid to Aunt Tournament and Evelina Brook at Evensong; and when Sir Arthur Champion had held needful interviews with his lawyer, land-steward, gardeners, master of the the stables, game-keepers, and principal tenants, there came a day when Arthur and Phyllis turned their backs on Queenscote—already in the process of being shuttered and brown-hollanded, as houses are wont to be shuttered and made unsightly when "the family is away"—and went off with Phyllis's "own little boy," and three or four servants, for Rome.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WINTERLY AND AT ROME.

It being a rule with Erica Rapier, in controlling Arthur Champion or any other man, never to oppose openly any purpose on which he had a strong mind, and always to declare cordial approval of every course he was firmly set on taking, the plan for wintering in Rome would have had her apparent concurrence, even if she had regarded it with extreme dislike. But in this matter her heart went with her words. For she had a strong opinion that he could not take a step more certain to further her amiable designs.

Alive to the necessity of cultivating even closer relations with Cyril Twyford, and "gardening" him with still greater assiduity, as the time drew nearer for the consummation of her designs, she was relieved to know that for six months Arthur Champion would be in the remote capital, where he could not observe her increasing intimacy with the man against whom she had warned him with sincere repugnance and equally insincere professions. Moreover, as she was not one of the women whom love deprives of moral and intellectual vision, Miss Rapier knew the weaknesses no less precisely than she knew the powers of the man she loved. And knowing his weak-

nesses, she saw that, instead of diverting his mind from its secret trouble and the principal cause of it, Arthur Champion's residence in a foreign land, whither he had taken Phyllis to be out of Cyril Twyford's way, would of itself render him incessantly mindful of the artist, and more likely to regard him with insane jealousy.

Knowing better than any living creature, better even than the sympathetic Phyllis, all the fine and perilous forces of the keenly sensitive and nervous nature that tabernacled under Arthur Champion's placid manner and air of nonchalant high-breeding, she saw how the proud, fastidious spirit would fret and fume at the wrong done by idle chatter to his incomparable wife. Better than anyone else she saw and could tell how he would lie awake by that pure, gentle angel's side, chafing and groaning in his heart at the misconceptions and malice of the gossip-mongers who had taken her guileless innocence for their football; how in the long, sleepless nights, his brain would confound merely annoying facts with wildly egregious and exasperating fancies, till he rose faint and trouble-worn in the pale mornings, with the dismal and distracting and altogether groundless notion that his Phyllis, so generous and simple, with all her grandeur of spirit and pellucid delicacy of taste, was the toy of thoughtless talkers in every draw-

ing-room of Mayfair, every country house from the Hebrides to the Needles.

She knew also from the fever and misery of his disordered brain there would sooner or later rise disloyal doubts of Phyllis—the apprehension that her generous regard for Cyril might have caused her to give him words and looks which so vain and corrupt a man would not fail to misconstrue; the fear that her tongue, ever the ready servant of her sympathetic and fervid heart, had given other hearers reason, or at least excuse, for thinking her unwisely fond of her cousin; the poisonous thought that, in her case, as in the case of many another woman, compassion had crossed the fine line which divides pity from love, and that the by-standers had really seen more of her life's game than one of the principal players in it. Erica Rapier was confident that all this would take place in Arthur Champion's heart and head, if, carrying Phyllis to a foreign land, he withdrew himself from half a hundred wholesome domestic interests that, so long as he remained in England, would tend to counteract the delusions of a heated fancy, and to correct the aberrations of an unbalanced mind. And the result, alas!, justified her confidence.

Starting hopefully, with a countenance and voice that missed only what Phyllis alone could miss in them, Arthur Champion gained so much

relief and animation from the excitements of the journey that he would have seemed at the height of spirits and health to any other travelling companion. Indeed, there were moments when Phyllis caught gleams of the vanished light, and notes of the music that had passed away. But they had not been ten days in Rome before his spirits drooped, and her mind was possessed by keener anxiety. From senses, finer and more trustworthy than the sense of hearing, she knew that trouble preyed upon him. The speech that might have taught her the source and nature of the distress, and enabled her to end it, could not have strengthened her certainty of the trouble's existence. To the first signs of his unrest there came less subtle indications—symptoms that were more violent, though scarcely more afflicting to the woman whose sensibility denied her the power to importune him for the information he was manifestly bent on with-holding from her.

How could she have been unaware that anxiety was biting his brain, and cankering his heart, and wearing his life away, when, throughout the long nights, she, lying still and patient by the dim light of the shaded night-lamp, saw him lying on the adjoining bed motionless and open-eyed—motionless for fear of waking her, and open-eyed because the wearisome wakefulness was somewhat less afflicting when, straining the eyelids

wide apart, he fixed the big eyes on objects that were not mere creations of brain's fever? How could she fail to feel that his trouble was nothing for her to question him about, when he rose morning after morniug without uttering a single word of reference to the distress, or even referring to the sleeplessness consequent from it—when day after day he feigned the cheerfulness he never felt.

At this crisis of their lives it would have been to the advantage of Arthur and Phyllis had Nature endowed them more liberally with what common people are pleased to call common sense. In this case, they would have extinguished their discomfort almost at its birth by one of those rough-and-ready conversations—one of those graceless conferences that, without being exactly squabbles, involve a good deal of squabbling—by which common-place husbands and wives are wont, from time to time, to settle their conjugal differences, and put themselves in a position to get pleasantly antagonistic about fresh grievances. Attended with tears on the one side, and perhaps a little swearing on the other, the homely interview in its first stage would have been fruitful of some such utterances as, "What is all this about?", "Nonsense! I have been watching you, and I have a right to know", "You have no right to secrets from

me!", "I insist on knowing everything!", "What have you to complain of?", "I will not be tyrannized over!", "Don't think to frighten me!", "Rather than submit to this, I'll write to papa!", (in Phyllis's case, "I'll write to aunt.") "Don't bully me!", "I only ask to be told the truth!", "If you don't like the truth, remember you brought it on yourself!" :—the familiar prelude being followed by statements more or less crushing, rejoinders more or less pathetic, numerous replies more or less sarcastic, numerous replications more or less untrue, possibly a fit of hysterics, certainly a needless and rather discreditable amount of noise. Nursed in the whirlwind and cradled in the storm, the interview would have ended with mutual endearments, following immediately on a statement in which Phyllis would have shown her good, sound common-sense by saying, "What a simpleton you have been, Arthur, to be jealous of such a poor reed of a creature as my cousin! Don't be so foolish again I do beg you. For, if Cyril were fifty cousins, instead of one, the happiness of the whole of them would not be a feather in the balance when weighed against my own interests."

To think of all the suffering Sir Arthur and Lady Champion underwent during their winter at Rome, to conceive all the pains they inflicted on each other, when they would have escaped

the suffering and mutually inflicted pains by taking the course that ordinary people would have taken under like circumstance, is to realize how well it is for men and women in this common life to have common sense and the hardihood to obey its orders. But the possession of these convenient qualities is incompatible with the possession of the finer instincts and powers that rendered these sufferers so greatly superior to most of their fellow-creatures. The wisdom of ordinary folk with just enough shrewdness and force of character to make rules for the guidance of the weaker specimens of their common kind; the sense of people without fine sensibility; the perceptions of persons wanting nice, moral discernment, differ widely from the perceptions, sense, wisdom of men like Arthur and women like Phyllis. Whilst care for her feelings made him the jealous keeper of his own trouble, she was too delicate, and sympathetic, and unselfish to seek her own peace by speech that might heighten his pain. It was impossible for her to intrude on sorrow from which he excluded her, to extort from him the secret he was bent on keeping to himself. The only course open to the two persons, thus mutually desirous of sparing each other's feelings, was to torture one another inexpressibly. And no better

consolation can be offered the reader's distress at their discomfort than an assurance that, if Arthur Champion and his wife had escaped some of their tribulation by mutual frankness, the relief would have been transient, and would not have materially affected the troubles that came upon them after their return from Italy to England.

If anxiety and restless nights were prejudicial to Sir Arthur Champion's bodily health, it can be imagined that the effects of her corresponding care and sleeplessness were plainly visible in Phyllis's looks. Her complexion, always more remarkable for delicacy than sanguine brightness, lost colour perceptibly in the earlier months of her sojourn in the sacred city, and in the later months faded even to paleness. At the same time she grew thin, and had recourse to half a hundred perfectly innocent stratagems to hide the lassitude of which she daily became more sensible. Of course these and other indications of her mental disquiet did not escape her husband's notice, but whilst observing them with natural solicitude he forbore to speak of them to her from considerations similar to those that made her reticent to him. Each knew the other had separate and secret causes of anxiety. And this knowledge was the division of two loving hearts.

In that unhappy time Phyllis received a steady stream of letters from England, and several of the letters came from Cyril Twyford, who, ever since her marriage, had been in the habit of writing to her with cousinly freedom once every fortnight or three weeks. There had of course been no secrecy on Phyllis's part respecting this correspondence, or indeed with respect to any of the numerous letters the post brought her from her army of friends. Lady Champion, it is almost needless to remark, had old-fashioned views respecting wifely duty and marital privilege with regard to her own letters and her husband's correspondents. Whilst all her letters, whether written by or to her, were open to her husband's inspection, she never exhibited the slightest curiosity about his letters, with the exception of those he offered to her perusal. Sir Arthur even had her express and frequently repeated permission to break the envelopes of letters left for her by the postman during her absence from home, whenever he wished to learn their contents without waiting for her to open them. Of course he seldom availed himself of this permission, and then only to get information and act upon it promptly in her interest and for her convenience. But Phyllis would have been well pleased had he exercised his power of surveying

her correspondence, in her absence as well as in her company, with greater frequency and freedom. She liked him to know all about her letters and to take an interest in them. And to have her pleasure in this matter it was her wont, alike at Queenscote and in St. James's Park, to leave her ordinary letters lying open on her writing-table so that they should come under his eye and arrest his attention at chance moments.

Doing in this matter in Rome after her wont in England, Phyllis told her husband whence came every fresh budget of letters, and after glancing at the epistles passed them across the table for his especial consideration; and it was seldom she thus offered to his attention a letter from Maud Tournament, or Evelina Brook, or Cyril Twyford, or Erica Rapier—in short, any of the group of the epistles which it was her habit to designate affectionately "letters from home" —without having first whetted his appetite for the document by reading out little scraps of the news as she first took a view of the writing.

The epistles Cyril Twyford sent from England to Rome for her amusement were just such letters as a gentleman, familiar with Rome and its art treasures, might be expected to write to a cousin of Lady Champion's character and position, for whom he cherished a warm regard

and with whom he had for years been allowed to maintain familiar intercourse. Together with much information respecting galleries and studios, works of sculpture and painting, they gave such bits of London gossip as the writer might well think likely to divert both Phyllis and her husband. In substance, expression, tone, they were unexceptional compositions. No husband in a right mind and happy temper could object to his wife receiving such letters from a near kinsman.

Twelve months since, letters no less freely and affectionately worded from the same correspondent to Lady Champion would have been perused by her husband with complacence, and even looked forward to as a source of congenial pastime. But now it ruffled Sir Arthur Champion to see an envelope addressed to his wife in the artist's handwriting. And if whilst reading one of these epistles in his presence she evinced particular approval of a passage by a smile or look of animation, his pulses quickened with annoyance. There were even moments when his heart leapt angrily and burned with secret wrath, as her eyes travelled tranquilly over the odious missives. When he could be so stirred by her indications of a moderate interest in these letters, Sir Arthur Champion's growing aversion to their writer cannot have

been free from jealousy, alike insultingly unjust to his wife, and miserably disgraceful to himself.

To make matters worse, Sir Arthur Champion actually had cause and excuse for thinking Phyllis derived more pleasure from the letters she received from her cousin at Rome than from any letters he ever penned her in earlier time. It is certain she gave them a large measure of attention, and was at greater pains to read out their "choicest bits" to her husband before giving them over to him for deliberate examination. But her conduct in this respect would have caused him less uneasiness, had he considered it in a reasonable spirit, and referred it to the true cause.

Deception is apt to beget insincerity even in the most sincere natures. If Arthur Champion had not first designedly misled Phyllis, she would not have unconsciously misled him in a matter touching their happiness and mutual confidence so deeply and delicately. But he was so nervously intent on hiding from Phyllis his suspicious aversion for her cousin that, instead of manifesting honestly his distaste for the artist's letters, he affected to find them more agreeably entertaining than ever. Putting aside the notes from Maud Tournament and Evelina Brook after a cursory survey of

their contents, he studied every line of Cyril Twyford's communications; and the hypocrite seldom returned one of the hateful epistles to Phyllis's hands, without having read audibly some of its passages with an air of the keenest relish. It was, therefore, only natural that Phyllis for the first time accorded Cyril Twyford a certain preference, prominence, and honour over her other correspondents. Ready at all times to approve whatever her husband commended, it would have been strange had she undervalued the writings that seemed to please him at a time when so few things gave him considerable enjoyment.

Let no one, however, do Phyllis the injustice of supposing that even in this affair she feigned what she knew herself not to feel. Even for his happiness and profit, she was incapable of wilful dishonesty towards her husband. In her thankfulness for what seemed to animate him agreeably, and lift him for a moment out of his untold grief, she exhibited by words and looks a regard for her cousin's letters that was no verdict of her calmer judgment. But this insincerity was the guileless offspring of genuine emotions, and partook in no degree of falsehood's nature. At the worst it was only the reflection and reaction of the deceit he practised on her. The only trickster in this curious

game of mutual misconception and misdirection was Arthur Champion, whose deceit was more than adequately punished by its effect on the multifarious and multiplying misapprehensions that were at the same time the source and food of his sharpest misery.

CHAPTER XIX.

CLOSER TOGETHER.

As she was no longer a child to be sent off to the school-room under charge of a governess, whenever her presence in the drawing-room might inconvenience her elders, Beatrice was a frequent cause of embarrassment to her Aunt Erica during the months Sir Arthur and Lady Champion spent in Rome. A clever girl of seventeen years being an observant creature, and prone by nature to draw inferences from what she observes, Miss Rapier could not safely execute her designs on Cyril Twyford and perfect his education in villainy under her niece's watchful eyes, and within range of her quick ears. The reader may be left to imagine the various reasons which indisposed Miss Rapier to give her ward any inducement to refer in her letters to the greater frequency of the artist's visits to Thurlow Lodge.

But, though she encountered many difficulties in keeping her closer and more delicate relations with the artist from her niece's knowledge, Erica Rapier would have accomplished her purpose, had the obstacles been twice as great and thrice as numerous. At least once a fortnight she got a clear twenty-four hours for clandestine interviews with the artist by graciously permitting Beatrice to accept an invitation to "dine and sleep" at the house of an intimate friend at Richmond or Hampton, whither she could go without her chaperon. At Christmastide Miss Rapier had several opportunities for cultivating Cyril Twyford's society and mind, while Beatrice was dancing at "parties for the young people," to which the gentleman-commoner of Christ Church was allowed to take his bright-spirited sister, under serious promise to keep her well in hand and look sharply after her. The brother and sister were also permitted to go three or four times to the theatre by themselves; and, having sent Beatrice to theatres and quiet little family dances under her brother's charge during the Christmas holidays, Miss Rapier, in the interval between Archibald's return to Oxford and his father's return to St. James's Park, consented on three or four several occasions to nurse a slight cold at home, while the girl accompanied

another damsel of her own gentle degree to the opera, in the care of a matron whose character and social quality made her a fit chaperon for Sir Arthur Champion's only daughter.

And Miss Rapier's reasons for thus putting herself "off duty," and transferring her official responsibilities to another person, were always so ingeniously natural and nicely adapted to the circumstances of the case that, on going forth unattended by her aunt, Beatrice never had the faintest suspicion that her escape for a few hours from the control of her usual governante was part of an arrangement for enabling Aunt Erica to enjoy a long and strictly confidential conference with Mr. Cyril Twyford. Indeed, Miss Beatrice was so neatly and steadily hoodwinked with respect to her aunt's peculiar intimacy with the artist at this stage of his career, that she will probably learn of it for the first time from this work. Nor is it marvellous that the girl was so completely deceived by her guardian. For, with all her marvellous faculty for fibbing, Miss Rapier differed so greatly from the common run of untruthful persons, in being generally veracious and seldom telling more lies than the occasion demanded, that persons far more suspicious than Beatrice lived with her for years without discovering how false she could be at a pinch.

Under these circumstances, it was not for Beatrice to suppose the speaker could have been closeted with the artist for three hours on the previous evening, when Miss Rapier said to her, "We may as well ask Mr. Twyford to luncheon this week, for he has not broken bread with us for some time, and he is very attentive in calling on us." From which words it may be inferred that, whilst admitting Cyril Twyford to secret conferences on matters unfit for the younger lady's ears, Miss Rapier required him to be no less regular than heretofore in visiting her openly, so that Beatrice should have no more occasion to remark on the infrequency than on the frequency of his appearances at Thurlow Lodge. And it may be imagined that Erica Rapier, with characteristic adroitness, turned to account every occasion these overt visits afforded her for confirming her power over Phyllis's cousin.

And whilst the lady had reason to congratulate herself on the satisfactory growth of her influence over the man whom she was training for monstrous villainy, Cyril Twyford cherished an animating confidence that his designs on the mistress of Thurlow Lodge would result in the way most agreeable to his hopes, and most convenient to his financial necessities. Even

the writer of this page cannot tell the precise time when Erica Rapier first detected Cyril Twyford's purpose of making her his wife. The same historian must even decline to offer an opinion whether the painter's purpose of appropriating Miss Rapier's person and fortune by matrimonial process originated in the unprovoked impulses of his chivalric nature, or should be referred to initiatory measures taken by the lady to inspire him with an ambition which she of course never for a single moment intended to satisfy.

It is, however, certain that, long before Sir Arthur and Lady Champion started for Rome, Erica Rapier was alive to the artist's preposterous dreams of enrichment, and was leading him to understand that his marriage with her would follow quickly on the separation of Sir Arthur from Lady Champion;—that the gift of her hand and wealth would, in fact, be her final reward to the man who should enable her to compass Phyllis's overthrow. And it is no less certain that, during Lady Champion's sojourn in the Sacred City, Miss Rapier did not shrink from the use of plain and altogether unambiguous speech to make Cyril Twyford understand that, whilst no considerations would induce her to consent to his desire so long as

Sir Arthur Champion maintained even a show of affectionate intercourse with his second wife, she was ready to become Mrs. Cyril Twyford as soon as they should have succeeded in driving Lady Champion from Queenscote, from her house in St. James's Park, and from her husband's heart.

The threat and the promise together had of course all their intended effect on the artist, who saw that by ruining Phyllis he should, whilst gratifying his long-cherished resentment against her, win the mistress he coveted, together with her wealth, which he coveted in a yet higher degree; and, on the other hand, that by sparing his cousin he should throw away his one sure means of escape from quick and ignominious destruction. Fate having offered him these alternatives, is it needful to say which of the two he chose? Was it possible for him even to hesitate in deciding whether he should serve Erica Rapier to his own enormous advantage, or serve Phyllis to his own sure and speedy perdition?

How little Cyril Twyford knew of the woman whose interests he now embraced more strongly than ever is sufficiently shown by the fact that he supposed her feelings for Arthur Champion closely resembled his own feelings for his

cousin. Hating Phyllis for having (as he steadily maintained and no less steadily believed) thrown him over for the sake of a grander match, he assumed without a single secret misgiving that Erica Rapier hated Sir Arthur Champion for throwing her over for the sake of Phyllis. Knowing that, so far as Phyllis was concerned, his only wish was to work her misery, he credited Miss Rapier with corresponding animosity against her brother-in-law. It never struck him that, whilst converting his old tenderness for Phyllis into rancorous and implacable enmity, jealousy had only deepened and intensified Miss Rapier's passion for Arthur Champion. And it was not till Erica Rapier had made all the use she wanted of him that Cyril Twyford discovered, to his dismay and maddening mortification, how egregiously he had been fooled and misled on this point by his own blind egotism quite as much as by her artifice. When the time for his agonizing enlightenment had come and was past, he ground his teeth in futile rage at thinking how dull a blockhead he had been not to see that, throughout all the machinations of their long-enduring conspiracy, her only aim was to regain her former influence over and domiciliation with a man she had never ceased to

worship, and in the absence of her discredited and banished rival to nestle again under his protection.

But the hour for Mr. Twyford's enlightenment was still in the future; and in the meantime he needed all the consolation and encouragement he could derive from the prospect of marrying Miss Rapier and her money in the course of six, twelve, or even eighteen months. For of late several things had gone ill with the artist, who seldom took the proper steps to make things go better. Fortune was again frowning upon the favourite who had received more than his fair proportion of her smiles. Since his last return from Baden-Baden with empty pockets, he had not prospered at play or work. Whilst the luck persisted in running against him at his favourite club, picture-dealers and connoisseurs persisted in keeping away from his studios. For months no gentlewoman of rank and wealth had invited him to put the beauties of her children on canvas or drawing paper.

Nor could the want of commissions be attributed altogether to Lady Champion's absence from England; for Mr. Twyford's professional income had been dropping away during the last eighteen months, and towards the close of the

last London season there was no little gossip in certain artistic cliques about the flimsiness and other faults of his recent work. Whilst he was said to be losing the favour of his patrons, the opinion prevailed that no one could justly accuse fashion of mere fickleness in deserting a painter whose colouring had become so strangely defective in perception and judgment.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

LONDON: PRINTED BY DUNCAN MACDONALD, BLENHEIM HOUSE.